

sins of my youth. by Alias_B

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Billy Hargrove Being an Asshole, Billy Hargrove Is Bad at Feelings, Billy Hargrove Lives, Billy Hargrove Redemption, Billy and Evie are dumb and then thotty eventually as the lord intended, Billy gets a plus size GF :), Bullying, Child Abuse, Eating Disorders, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Enemies to Lovers, Explicit Sexual Content, F/M, Fat Shaming, Grooming, Mental Health Issues, Neil Hargrove is His Own Warning, Past Sexual Abuse, Pica, Post-Stranger Things 2, Protective Billy Hargrove, Romantic Soulmates, Teacher-Student Relationship, Underage Drinking, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Unhealthy Relationships, plus size OC

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Summary:

It was common knowledge that Billy Hargrove hated Hawkins. Hated Cherry Lane. Even loathed the strange girl next door. Evie Fenny wasn't too fond of the chaotic Cali transfer either. An awful high school tradition sparks a chain of events that changes everything, ultimately bringing two frayed souls together.

((*Set after S2, likely to not have much supernatural. Teenage drama and angst only babes ;D))

1. Fast Times

Author's Note:

Hey!!! I'm definitely not giving up on LFTM, I've had this story whirling around my brain and it's been pulling at me for a while. Hoping I can slow down, care for myself, and juggle both fics at my own pace. Thank you guys for reading and for being so supportive. I hope everyone who enjoyed WTL also enjoys this fic, it's a totally different direction. I'm excited to share it!

I'll tag warning in each chp like I always too. TW: Light bullying, hints at an inappropriate relationship between a teacher/student, and teenage jerks.

A blaring bell trilled. Lunch time. So close and yet so far. Scrambling high schoolers like zoo animals clamored into the cafeteria. Knocking shoulders and bouncing around. No one really cared about knowledge today, the last day of school before winter break began.

1984. Coming to a close.

“Evie!” A hand rose to wave. One pink scrunchie around the elegant wrist. Heather Holloway. Cute as a button smiling there. Hands pulled headphones down to acknowledge her. Evangeline Fenny. Best friends since the sandbox and now seniors. “This stupid day is dragging.”

“It’s killing me.” Evie whined to herself, settling her beat up lunchbox on the table. Red and blue pattern, scribbled all over with song lyrics in black marker. “Mrs. Stockard fell asleep at her desk, I wanted to die.”

“She snores so loudly.” Heather sparkled when she laughed, sweeping her hair back into a high ponytail with her scrunchie. Evie held a mirror up for her to see out of habit. “Thanks.” It was particularly louder than usual. Teens pregameing the parties to come

over the two week vacation.

“Going skiing with the folks this year?”

“No, they’re going up to the cabin and I’m staying home after Christmas.” Heather unpacked her lunch, carefully organizing it. Evie pulled a regular PB and J out, amused.

“Sushi?”

“My mom’s going through a phase.” Heather poured herself a bit of soy sauce and plucked up chopsticks.

“Your rich is showing, Heath.” Evie giggled when a foot kicked at her under the table.

“Trade you a piece for half the pear.”

“Deal.” They switched. Evie tucked some unruly dark curls aside, sitting back.

“So...there is a party tonight. Loch Nora. Bunch of schools.”

“Which ones?” Evie’s brow rose.

“Ridgemont will probably crash, but who cares. It’s winter break, we’ll go and have some fun then crash at my place. Eat chips, make fun of them, and pass out like we always do.” Heather bounced a little. “C’mon, Evie. I’ll pick you up and we can walk from my house.”

“I’ll think about it.” That meant yes to Heather. She grinned, reaching across to pat her friend’s arm playfully.

“It’ll be fun.”

Evie just whined and crunched on her pear, brows scrunching. Parties weren’t the same since the incident. But, she picked the popular, social butterfly for her closest friend.

The two couldn’t have been any more different.

Heather Holloway. Rich girl from Loch Nora befriending Evangeline Fenny, a Cherry Lane girl, in preschool. They switched beaded hair ties and the rest was history. Bonded over music and fashion. Heather was classically stunning as if she jumped off a magazine.

Students used to make snide comments. That Heather kept Evie around because she made her look prettier. Sweet Heather shut that down. Loudly. Whenever the subject came up. Evie Fenny was a bigger girl. Plush. Fat. It wasn't a dirty word. She was a strange and pretty teen who carried herself too high to be bothered with comments.

Water off a duck's back was the saying.

Used to be she hid herself under big sweaters, tunics, and flared jeans. But, that was before the incident. Afterward, she came to school with a new haircut. Louder makeup. Even louder, fitted clothing. Flaunted the hourglass and caught eyes on her hips swaying. Sat next to Heather at lunch as if nothing had changed. Red glossed lips only smiled and the student body took to her. Those who stayed angry burned alone.

Thick skin, no pun intended.

"If that asshole Tannen shows up, I'm dipping." Evie decided with one breath.

"I'd say that I'll protect you, but you made your point last year."

Ah, the incident.

"I'm never going to live that down."

"It was legendary." Heather beamed, crushing her fist into her opposite palm. "Bam. Prick went down. My friend is Wonder Woman. Super Bitch."

Evie broke to laugh, eyes rolling.

"Truthfully, I don't recall it all."

That was a lie, she remembered every second of it. Sometimes her knuckles warmed at the thought.

“I just...didn’t think you had moves like that. Your mom is basically Dolly Parton. You don’t even like violence. You squirm during horror flicks. You love your cat, your guitar, and all plant life...and you beat the hell out of Ridgemont’s golden boy asshole quarterback.”

It did earn Evie some Hawkins’ fame. Ridgemont was their main rival. The Bulldogs. Football players found a soft spot for the teen.

“Don’t tell my mom she’s Dolly Parton, that’ll go straight to her head.” Evie joked, popping her water bottle open to drink. Heather’s big eyes lifted behind her.

A flood of cologne wafted before two fingers tugged a curl. Little harder than they should have. Water choked to spill onto Evie’s chest.

“Whoops, you got all wet, Fenny.” A tongue clicked. Billy Hargrove slid around the table. All his glory. Heather plucked up a napkin to offer it.

“Watch it, Hargrove.” She huffed down at herself. The yellow tee tucked into her jeans was soaked through.

“Girls can’t help it around me, I guess.” He had one hand in his pockets and another cradling his silver lighter. Flicking it open and closed. Eyes narrowed. “Polka dots, huh. I had you figured for florals.”

“You’re an asshole.” She covered her damp shirt and bra with her striped cardigan. Thick fall colors warmed her skin. Noted the fact that he’d thought about it.

“Whatever you say, Ivy.”

Billy knew her name. They were neighbors. Unfortunately. Right down to sharing the same space between their bedroom windows. She’d had dinner at their house. Susan Hargrove was new and eager to make some friends and Ms. Fenny was eager to be friends with everyone. Perfect match.

Evie glared up at him. Fucking Adonis.

“Heather, you going tonight?” He ignored his neighbor and leaned over with one palm on the table, back to Evie as he sat down to flash that darling smile.

“Maybe.” Heather gestured with her chopsticks.

“I can work with maybe.” He acted like the girl behind him wasn’t there. Frankly, Evie was used to being invisible. It was better than being bullied. Most days. “Maybe I’ll see you there.”

“Maybe you apologize to my friend and say her name right.” Heather winked at him.

“Who?” Billy stood and turned, mocked some surprise. “Oh. *Evangeline*. So quiet, I forgot you, chica.”

She wasn’t sure if that was a jab at her mixed heritage or him just being a smartass. Billy rolled her name off his tongue like it was a joke. Like it wasn’t a real word. Blue eyes alight at her stony expression. Sly and alert.

The California transfer vibrated after leaving the basketball team before the season ended. Word was that he was persuaded to leave after some fight with Steve Harrington. Billy was a strange one too.

Often, he seemed lax when he was alone like the world didn’t matter. Other days, he was rocking and quick on his feet. Hungry and itching for something. Anything. It was a scary look on such a pretty boy. You could never gauge where his mind was. Where it would go next.

“Evangeline.” He sounded out again even slower. “Your mom lose a bet?”

“It’s a poem.” She replied flatly, sitting back to cock her head at him. Billy snapped his fingers to point.

“Sounds like the name of some chick whose man died in her arms.”

She huffed at him, leaning in.

“...That would be what the poem is about.”

“Fucking depressing.” Billy tapped his chin. “I got it. I’m going to call you, Angel. I won’t forget that.”

“You are not calling me-”

“Trying to compromise with you, Fenny. You cast the first stone.” Billy flicked his eyes to Heather. “Bring your friend with you to the party, Heather. Some guys like angel cake.” He winked and slunk off to his band of merry assholes. This school worshiped him. Kissed the ground he walked on since he started in fall.

“What a fucking slimeball.” Evie grumbled to herself, stuffing trash aside to ball it up. Thought about tossing it at Billy’s big head. Heather gave this conflicted look as if to say, *but he’s cute, right?*

“Ignore him.”

“Bad enough his family moved in next to me.” They packed up their lunches. “God, I want a smoke so bad.”

She didn’t keep the habit up just to save her singing voice. Her mom picked up cigarettes only after the divorce last year. Smoked out her window and hid it, but Evie knew. No judgment there. Better than other habits moms pick up after divorces.

“I’ll pick you up at seven tonight?” Heather walked out with her after the bell rang.

“Yeah, I’ll see you in fifth.” Evie turned to go to her locker and stuffed the lunchbox away. Grabbed a book to hurry to class. History. Three more periods left. Students fidgeted around her.

“Hey, Evie.” Steve Harrington batted his eyes at her. Friendly enough these days after he left the popular cliché and broke up with Nancy Wheeler. Sometimes having your heart stopped on made you nicer. Not always. “You, ah, do the paper?”

“All six pages.” Evie set it on her desk. “You?”

“I made an attempt.” It was strange because Steve never gave her

the time of day before this year. Maybe the guy was lonely. He tapped his pencil and the chatter quieted when their teacher walked in. Late as always.

“Class, pass your papers to the front.”

“Hopefully they don’t come back with red wine stains.” Robin mumbled behind her, one leg crossed up so she could draw on the rubber side of her sneakers. Evie caught a snort, taking the papers to pass them along. “I like the jacket.”

“Thanks. New haircut?”

“My own dad didn’t notice.” Robin beamed.

“Psst, Evie.” A note flicked on her desk. Tammy Thompson. Pretty girl, kind of shy. “To Steve.”

Evie considered herself a professional middle man for lovesick note passing. Discreetly, she gave it to Steve, head cocking. He furrowed his brow upon seeing it, but wrote back.

Whatever the reply, it made Tammy’s shoulders fall.

AP Biology was next. Teacher treated it like his kingdom and didn’t pose much of a challenge because he was disorganized as hell. Evie was relieved to share the class with Heather.

Billy, Tommy, and Carol also had it too. Hargrove bitched for a week about how the other science classes had no openings. Strange because he wasn’t an idiot. Still got his work in and maintained a B average. Probably due to his dad. Neil Hargrove seemed like a real hardass. And all of Cherry Lane had heard him and Billy arguing at some point.

Evie might have also witnessed some more physical spats through the windows.

She figured it was why Billy hated her. She knew something about him. Something he hid because it made him feel smaller. He caught her eyes once and barked nastily before taking off in his Camaro. A gust of smoke.

She never brought it up.

Dads could be real assholes.

“Watch the movie. Fill out the worksheet.” Their teacher was as ready for this day to be over as the students were. Lights went down. Yawns followed. Evie propped her elbow up on the high lab table she shared with Heather, doodling new lyrics between answering questions.

A crumpled paper hit her hair. Stuck into brown curls. Heather turned back to glare at Tommy shrugging with a sleazy grin.

He was no artist. Evie smoothed it for a wide, big lipped and breasted caricature of herself. She drew on it and scribbled a note back. Smiling sweeter when she flicked it at his chest. Carol and Billy leaned in on either side to see Tommy’s expression sour because Evie gave him nothing.

“*You got my hair all wrong.*” She’d written. Fixing it for him.

Billy snorted and turned back to defacing his textbook.

“Bitch.” Tommy muttered to himself, tossing it away. Evie finished her sheet, dug for her compact to reapply a lip color. Caught Billy behind her. Intent on whatever vulgar drawing his mind was concocting. Blue eyes flicked like he’d been aware of her this entire time.

The mirror snapped shut.

** ** *

Study hall. Last period of the day. Most kids who had it were skipping out early during the hour. Slipping away one by one through the library. Evie was one of those kids.

“Leaving so soon, Miss Fenny?” The smooth as silk voice lowered, startled her enough to drop her notebooks and folders.

“Fr...Mr. Bowers.” Evie dropped before her English teacher standing so close to her. Second period. Been in Hawkins three years teaching

the junior and senior classes. Fredrick Bowers. Dream of a man to all the teen girls. "Sorry." She bit her bottom lip, eyes lifting to see him and his shadow blocking the light from touching her.

"No, I'm sorry, Evie. I figured you'd heard me coming." Sky blue eyes centered on Evie there before he came to one knee. Helped her gather lose papers strewn about.

Mr. Bowers had a name and face all the teen girls drew little hearts around in pink gel pen.

Evie thought she saw those same cartoon hearts bubbling up behind his back. Popping like gum. Styled toffee blond locks, trimmed mustache, and groomed side burns. A simple patterned shirt tucked into fitted slacks with the sleeves rolled up. Never a tie. Something groovy about him that stuck from the seventies. Mid thirties and hell of a smile.

Evie tucked hair aside, displayed her blush in full view obscenely when he flashed those sparkly whites at her. Eyes crinkling.

"I'll warn you next time."

Her heart plucked like a song when their fingers brushed. Dashing and broad. A Jane Austen character come to life. Enough to make any young girl melt. And how quickly she did.

"Next time." Evie gave this scoff. Pulling her notes close as they both came to their feet with hard intent eyes.

"I wanted to give you something. A book to read over the break." He pulled it from his leather messenger bag and peered around.

"An assignment?" Evie sparkled at him so he was lighter.

"No, it's just because I believe you're so clever and mature. I think you'll read it with an open mind and we can talk about it like we talked about all the others. It's complicated material. I, ah, really shouldn't be giving you this book." He offered it. "But, there were quite a few I wasn't allowed to give you. After that chat we had over *The Crucible*. I'm just so fascinated by what you think."

"*Lolita*. I know what happens in this one." Evie peered at the battered title. Rough paper between her fingers, it was clearly an old copy. She peered at his chest instead of his eyes. "We-

"Don't you miss talking? You know. Last year. Someone who knows what you're going through. I want all my students to be comfortable around me."

"I am comfortable, we..." Evie glanced as someone passed far down the hallway.

Bowers helped her after her dad left. A shoulder. A confidant. A crush that... She felt her heart close in on itself.

"I thought you said we couldn't anymore."

"I miss you." He whispered that. Lush and blunt. She barely heard it. Eyes snapped up.

Someone missed her. Someone wanted to listen. Someone who saw her depth.

His wife left him before he came to Hawkins. Evie learned a great deal about her too.

"I won't tell, I never do." She hid it away into her bag, matched his tone. "We can...talk. Not here."

"Good." He swallowed. "I just think you blossom under guidance and support. I always knew you were one of those girls."

Evie blushed again. Eyes on her shoes.

"I wanted to say I was impressed with your paper as well. As always." Fredrick gave her arm a pat and left his hand there. Fingers pressed into the knit fabric of her cardigan. His lip twitched.

"Good. That's...I'm glad." Evie's eyes flickered over stormy blue ones, swaying. Lashes gave a dreamy bat. "I was thinking, ah, about you when I wrote it."

"Really, you should speak up in class more." Fredrick gave her one

subtle squeeze and dropped his hand. “All those funny poems you shared last year.”

“My songs.” Evie corrected softer and he only smiled to nod.

“Right.” An idle step backwards before he leaned over her. A great deal taller. The shadow crept over her eyes this time. “You have a Merry Christmas, dear. And speak up again in class, Evie. You know I love to hear from you.”

A sensation like a fizzling sparkler glowed in her belly. Out her spine. Spread over skin.

“I know.” She giggled at him, peering around. “Merry Christmas, Mr. B. We’ll talk.”

“Small town, I’m sure I’ll see you out and about.” A wink and he was gliding off. Shoulders back and chest perched high.

“You might.” Evie swooned against her locker. Watched him go. Gaspd a breath into her lungs. Swept all the clouds aside to fill her backpack with work. He made her feel so special, like no one ever could.

“Anyone...” She sang to herself, “*who knows what love is...*” Fingers plucked up a final book. Evie hummed and thought of small cartoon blue birds spinning around her head as she went into the restroom. Washed her hands and lingered to see her reflection.

Evie was in a strange place. In and out of her skin. Torn between love and hate for her body.

Usually, it just took a brave face. Her dad always used to tilt her chin and tell her to put on her bravest face before leaving home.

She hoped the one she chose was convincing.

Her mom would always spin her favorite Bible or Dolly Parton quotes. Which helped on occasion even if she wasn’t sure which source the words came from half the time.

A sigh. This was her flesh. She’d live in it as best she could.

Dreamed herself into something better.

Footsteps hurried down the hallway until the door shoved open. Humming cut.

“Hargrove!” She gasped, dropping her messenger bag. “Billy, you can’t be in here!”

“God damn it, Fenny. You again?” Billy skidded to hush her. Pressed them back into the wall. The heat of his body engulfed her frame, standing a good few inches taller. “Do me a fucking solid. Hide this for me.”

Billy had no sense of boundaries because he was stuffing a baggie into her front jean pocket.

“What are you doing?” She seethed at him, smacking his arms off her to put some distance. “Get off me!”

“Don’t say a word. Got it?” Billy lifted a finger with an intent look. Smelled of leather and his heavy cologne. Hairspray too. It all overshadowed the cigarette scent. He smoothed his tee out and turned to see the door. Scrambling like a spider, Billy jumped up on the toilet, threw his messenger bag outside, and pulled himself up. Wiggled his way out.

Evie heard a thud and groan.

“What the fuck?” She whispered, more so to herself as he disappeared. Hands pulled what was clearly concealed weed bundled up several times and bagged from her pocket. “Shit.” More footsteps before the door burst as she shoved it away.

“You see that Hard-grove kid?” A thick accent asked. Security guy. Useless.

“Uh!” Evie pulled her bag up. “Who?...This is the ladies room! Can’t a girl have a moment here?”

“Sorry!” He cringed away before she jumped into mushy period talk. It always worked.

Evie rolled her eyes and marched out to find Billy. Casual as can be, he tossed his bag into the trunk of his car and stilled to light a cigarette. Grumbling, steps hurried up the hill.

“Asshole!” She tossed the weed at his chest, made him catch it awkwardly and stuff it into the trunk with a hiss.

“Keep a lid on it, will you?” He slammed it shut. No one was around to see them.

“Don’t do that shit again.” She pushed into him to go, Billy’s big hand wrapped around her wrist. Tugged her square into his chest. An unkind grin swept.

“I had you figured, didn’t I? You didn’t say anything.” Billy blew smoke into the air, plucked the cigarette out to flick it with his free hand.

“Let go.” Evie huffed. “I would have been in deep shit too for that.” She wiggled and pushed at his chest.

Billy flicked his bright eyes over hers. So brown they looked black in winter. He never noticed that she had a dusting of freckles across her nose and cheeks like he did. Pale for a girl with darker features. Indiana falls and winters must have taken the color right out of her. Looked like a lot of the mixed gals he knew back home.

Big curls. Soft and curvy.

Angry at him over something he did.

There's no place like home, he figured.

“You’re so weak.” Billy laughed at her. Took another drag. “They told me you freaked out on a guy last year.”

“You want to be next?” She twisted away from him and turned. It wasn’t a real threat. He’s seen her tend to plants like they were humans. Feed neighborhood cats and nurse her own. Old black cat with not long left. Little fucker was always creeping him out from her bedroom window. Constantly staring with huge green eyes like it knew something Billy didn’t.

“Babysit your own weed.”

“You walking home?” Billy was relentless, voice lifting.

Evie huffed and turned.

“What, are you going to say I probably need the exercise? My bike chain broke.”

“Christ, I was gonna offer a ride. Figured I owed you for saving my damn weed and my break. Not like it's out of the way.” Billy turned to open the passenger door. “Quit being a drag and get in. I don't bite hard...unless asked.”

“You're such a creep.” She eyed him there. Wondered how he stayed warm in a tee, jeans, and leather jacket. “Not waiting for Max?” He gave this annoyed look.

“She's going out with her stupid friends, not my problem today.” Billy got in, gesturing. “At least close the door if you're not coming. I went through the effort to open it for you.”

“What a gentleman.” Sarcasm.

Evie came back toward his car and debated it. Smelled like it might rain with the sky turning grey. And she really didn't want to walk in these shoes. Rationalizing it, she slipped inside and shut the door. Settled her bag in her lap. Even buckled up. Billy revved the engine and skidded to speed out without a second glance.

“You going to the party with Heather?”

Evie peered at him watching the road with this hard look on his face. Ghosted a smile. *Bingo*.

“You're being nice to me to get to Heather, huh. You know you're not the first guy to pull this. Could have just asked me about her.”

Crystalline eyes flared up at her face.

“What? Dorky chicks like you turn me on, too.” He replied rougher, not bothering to watch the road.

“Wow. Spread it on thick, Hargrove.” She turned from him.

“I always do.” He hit a hard corner. *Christ, he drives fast.* “I got a shot?”

“She thinks you’re cute.” Evie shrugged. Far too used to this. Eyes slid to his profile. Wild curls still golden on grey days. The boy glowed. It was absolutely insufferable. Leaves whirled by, brown and dead. A smile crossed her face. “Listen. Since you’re saving me a walk. I’ll help you.”

“Help me? I don’t need your help, I just wondered if she was gonna show.” He scoffed, turning on Cherry Lane.

“You want to know what Heather likes. It’ll help you.” She crossed her arms, nearly flying forward when he screeched to a stop in front of his house. Billy shot her a look, filled with pride. “You got a pen and paper, bud?”

He snatched her bag, tore a page from her notebook and dug into his glove box for a pen.

Ass. She hugged it back to her chest.

"Talk."

“Okay.” A breath. “The thing about Heather is she’s a romantic. Jane Austin girl. Pride and Prejudice. If you can quote that just once like Mr. Darcy, she’s yours... Well? Are you writing?”

Billy did a double take and huffed, grumbling. He actually marked it down.

“Mr. Who?”

“Your life amazes me.” She chuckled. “Darcy.”

“Got it. Darcy. I’ll ask Susan about that shit, she’s a reader.” He muttered, tongue sweeping out before he scribbled.

“And she loves museums. First date ideas. Milkshakes. Cheese fries with jalapenos. Cheeseburger gal. Chinese from that corner joint.

Always spicy. Easy picks.”

“A girl after my own burning heart.” Billy felt her peer at him again. Lips lifting with this expression he couldn’t read. Blinked her big eyes and went on.

“Definitely loves to snuggle in with something scary even though they freak her out. Must be a curiosity thing.”

“Any excuse to get close to someone, I like it. This is gold, Angel, go on.”

“You know, I think that’s all I got for you.” Evie turned to get out, sighing. That was just a little evil. “Billy.”

“What?” He shut his door and turned from her.

“Thanks for the ride.” She moved to go toward her house. “Knock ‘em dead.”

Billy didn’t reply. Just watched her go into her house before he dug for another smoke.

“Mom?” Evie called. “I’m home.”

“I’m in my room, sweetheart!”

Ramona Fenny was a spirited woman, went by Mona to the neighborhood. A girl of the 60s. Built like Dolly Parton with a pumped hairstyle to match in sleek dark brown, almost black. She worshiped the woman. Looked like she could have modeled atop a cake.

A church going girl who used prayer to get her through the divorce. Never pushed it on others, not even Evie. Too busy pushing other things. Like the free days she lost having her daughter young. She liked what worked in life and this worked for her. Liked the pretty side to things.

Mona was a sunny side up sort of mother.

Best friends with Claudia Henderson as they both went through

divorces which was not in God's plan. Evie liked Dustin, she babysat him on occasion and he was a good kid. Bullied like her.

Mona owned the favored hair salon in town. Worked long hours with a team of women and ran a tight ship. Did hair for all the social elites so she knew everyone and all the hot gossip. And did she love that detail the most. Evie helped out with reception during vacation time. Liked the extra cash.

"I was going to go to Heather's later, there's a party."

"Oh, have fun, baby." She pushed her kid to go out. To live. To be smart. Never asked her to call. Not out of trust for Evie, she couldn't be bothered. Never imagined her daughter would be up to mischief.

If only she knew.

Sometimes, Mona keyed in when it suited her. Understood when Evie's likes and dislikes changed. When she asked to not go to church anymore because it didn't help her after her dad walked out. Ramona was understanding as long as you didn't bring up things like depression and anger. There always had to be a way out. Turn the other cheek.

Evie knew her mother always thought the best.

"Great." Evie crossed to steal the hair brush, helped her mother out with the teasing. Dyed rich and dark locks that used to be a mousy brown. Dark eyes like her daughter. Evie didn't look like her father with his brighter features. Her lush hair and russet eyes. Thick brows. "You going out? All dressed up..."

"Just into town, couple of errands."

That was something that changed a week after her dad moved out. Mona's style revamp. She was a woman of the sixties and seventies and that came back full force. Styled and pumped up like she was walking out of a Nancy Sinatra music video. Men around town noticed it and the woman certainly speculated.

But, her daughter had a style change too after the incident so it must have run in the family.

“Better?” Evie eyed the glittery rings sitting in a ceramic dish. They looked like gumballs there.

“Touch of hairspray and I’ll be right as rain.” Pink manicured nails came up with the can. “Take cover, baby.”

“Got it.” Evie disappeared in a waft of spray. Stole an ice cube from the freezer to crunch it out of this habit she picked up when dad was gone. Cool and melty between her fingers before she swallowed it down. Felt the bulge tense all down her throat. Another followed. Teeth straining to crack it like glass. The chunks went down a little less smooth as she looked for real food and shut the fridge instead.

Evie went into the bedroom to see her old cat on the pillow. His head lifted. Skinny and balding. Blind in one eye.

“How’re we doing, my handsome boy?” Evie dropped her bag and crossed to pet him. Purrs erupted, whiskers twitching. “Bourbon, my darling.”

A scratch of a meow rasped.

“Yes, I love you too. I’d kiss you if my lips weren’t done up.” She smacked her lips and stood. “Outfit.” Clothing pushed around. Her room was a small, intimate space. Few pictures and purple curtains. Desks covered in song lyrics, trinkets, and needle felting projects.

Evie held up garments to the cat, but he was no help. Just purred there like a motor boat. Settled on a black top with some sparkle and a magenta wash denim jacket. Jewelry was a must, she preferred earrings that were huge acrylic hearts. Bourbon had gotten into the window to watch the window across the way.

Billy wandering shirtless and damp. Muscles red and bulging like he’d done a quick work out

“Yeah, not today, my sweet.” Evie plucked the cat from the window and reached to close the blinds. Billy caught her. Winked and licked his lips slower. She made a face at him. Utterly loathing and not impressed at his peacock way of navigation. “Ew.”

The blinds snapped down, leaving Billy to laugh there. Evie carried

her purring cat out, chiding.

"Don't make his head any bigger than it already is."

2. A Million Dead Stars

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello all~ Down the rabbit hole. TW: Teenagers can be the worst. Bullying. Fatphobia. Slut shaming. Cruel boys being cruel boys.

All Evie had to do was wait patiently. For Heather to pop out back and for Billy to swoop in and make his bold move.

The goofy grin Heather walked back in with did not disappoint. Not at all.

“Hey, you.” Curls bounced when Evie cocked her head and Heather plopped down with a drink. They tapped red plastic cups.

“So, I just had an...amazing conversation.”

“Yeah...?” Evie sang softer. “Pray tell.”

“Just...wow. Billy Hargrove. Him too, huh?”

“We knew it would happen. He was being way too cool around us at lunch when the guy has been nothing but shitty toward me since moving here. He gave me a ride home, it was obvious. And so...?”

“Where to start?” Heather put her arm up on the couch and took a long drink, laughing. Pretty in pink girl. “First he brought up Jane Austen. Said they were studying it in English which was a total bluff.”

“We’re not.” Evie confirmed. “He’s in my second period.”

“You gave up choir for that specific period with Bowers.” Heather recalled more so to herself.

“No, I just,” Evie scrambled, “I just didn’t want to do choir anymore. The teacher played favorites. Got sick of it.”

Another longer drink and she went on.

"So, continue..."

"He brought up *Pride and Prejudice*. Which, okay, but *Emma* is way better."

"You're wrong, but I still love you." Evie curled up to face her friend. Heather laughed and took her hand, leaned her head on the couch to gather herself in a fit of giggles.

"He said *Mr. Dancy*."

"No?" Evie died there. "And I hoped he might learn something."

"Yes!" Heather smacked at her. Music pumped behind them. Teens roaming and making a mess of the nice mansion. "I felt bad because...I snorted about it. In his face."

"You know, I'll give Billy a point. Go on."

"Museums. Fuck me gently with a chainsaw, I love you...but I'd soon jump into a pit of alligators before going to a museum for a date. Bowling or mini golf please." Heather was chuckling. "Ballpark hot dogs are way better than cheeseburgers. Popcorn over cheese fries and a damn milkshake? Slushies or nothing. I'm lactose intolerant. He was trying to bore me to death or poison me, Eve."

Evie broke to laugh again, barely able to speak.

"I know! That's why I suggested all of that."

"You bitch." Heather was giggling still into her shoulder. Hands clasped. They broke to drink. "Oh! And campy action adventure movies or rom-coms only for Heather Holloway. I don't get why you even go for horror, you wouldn't hurt a fly and you squirm."

"He bombed." Evie covered her eyes, wiped a tear aside. "I almost pity him."

"What's funny is you like all that stuff. I'm not sure if he was faking it well, but he seemed kinda into most of it."

"I've been running out of ideas when your followers scramble. Sue

me, Heath.” Evie pushed up. “I definitely need another drink.”

“Fine, fine. Hey,” Heather laced their pinkies together, “teen boys are the worst. Thanks for bouncing another off me. Billy’s cute and all, but hell, I have too much on my plate for a boy right now.”

“Got that right.” Evie weaved between dancing crowds to the punch bowl. Passed some guy puking into a vase and another group cheering on an arm wrestling match. Spooned herself a full cup. Was mid gulp when she turned to a pair of scathing blue eyes. Oh, Billy.

“You fucking-”

“I’m going to stop you right there, Hargrove, and walk that a-way.” She gulped again and passed him.

“You think that shit’s funny?” Billy had a fistful of her jacket collar. Snarling like a mad dog. “She laughed at me.”

The humiliation of it seemed to make Billy the angriest.

Evie felt that resonate bitterly because he sounded wounded and oblivious to what life threw her way.

“Funny? Only after the first ten boys.” She shrugged. “Now it’s just sad. I’m not stupid.”

“I’d say jerking me around is pretty stupid.” Billy was clearly smashed. Smelling of beer and weed. Eyes red to hell. “Maybe you’re so fucking single and miserable, you make sure your friend stays that way too, huh.”

Billy knew a nerve was plucked at that by the way she stilled to go colder. Brown eyes molten at him.

“You don’t know me. You’re a fucking asshole, you know that? I think we both know which one of us is *miserable*. Go show off for the school all you want, you don’t fool everyone with those pretty blue eyes.” Evie shoved off him. Wondered if she caught that same frayed nerve.

“Hey, we got a problem here?” A Hawkins football player towered.

Couple of his buddies from other schools that weren't Ridgemonst made a barricade between Billy and Evie.

"I'm talking to Fenny, dickweed. You mind?" Billy spat. Evie huffed and rolled her eyes.

"You're talking to the girl who kicked Brock Tannen's ass. Show some respect." Another meathead joined in. Evie hid amusement because this was an odd change over the year.

"Guys, stand down, you really don't have to do this for me." It was...weird. Frankly, Billy looked like he was about to take on all of them.

The boy in front gave Billy's shoulder a comical brush and they went off like a herd of happy buffalo.

"The fuck, are you teen royalty somehow?" Hargrove made a face at her tired expression.

"No, just some lucky idol they keep around. I still get stepped on in the hallway and I pass everyone's love notes for them." Evie sipped. "I don't care that you like Heather, I care that you pretended to be something close to kind with me to get at her."

"Don't worry, I'm not interesting in being *kind* to you again." It came out nastier than he meant it too. Alcohol did that to his old man as well. Disgust welled and Billy had nowhere to put it so it flowed out. "No one here gives a shit about what you have to say, Fenny. Don't count on them trying either just because you're some freak they keep around for one sick story. They're all gonna laugh at you."

Evie blinked a few times. Saw Billy's shoulders sink while they stared into each other, both searching long and hard. Finished her drink in one swig and tossed the cup at his shoes.

"You fucking insecure asshole, check a mirror in five years and let me know if you like what you see. Not like you even do now, I bet, so enjoy denial. And stay away from me, Hargrove." She went down the hallway beyond a spiral staircase and almost ran into a huge chest.

As if this night couldn't get any worse.

Fuck.

Brock Tannen. Poster boy of rich asshole quarterback from their main rival school. Chestnut hair and chiseled good looks covered evil.

"Fat Fenny. Oh, sorry. Old habit. Evie. Missed you around these parts." He nursed a can of beer and leaned into the wall. "Go psycho on anyone lately?"

"The year isn't over." She moved to pass him.

"Look." He jolted in front of her. "Admittedly, I was a real shithead. I know that now. My folks even got someone for me to talk to. I'm working through all my shit. But, I was an ass to you."

"We knew this." Evie tried to go the other way, but his shoulder blocked her. She caught sight of his chain. A silver playboy bunny charm he loved to show off.

"Listen, the year is almost up. I want you to know I don't hold it against you. You went through some shit at home too. Truce?" No response. A beat before his chin lifted. "You never went crying to your slut mother about me. My dad said she sucks the mailman off."

"Don't say shit about my mother." Evie was on her toes. Hands clenching.

"Didn't cry to daddy either, oh...my bad. You can't." Brock's laughter rang sirens around her head. He was begging her to go off again. "Why didn't you tell mommy about me? We almost had fun."

"You didn't get far with me if that's what you mean, you think I'd give you my tears? Just embarrassed that you bat at fat chicks and get turned down. Eat shit, Tannen." She got around him, staggered away.

"Maybe I'll convince you. I just want to be friends. It's going to be a new year soon." His voice lingered along the hallways. "Just messing with you cause I like you is all." More chuckles followed.

Guys like Tannen secretly wanted her. Unobtainable and strange girls who didn't conform to stupid high school stereotypes, it really pissed people off. Exotic, which was truly the worst word. Evie was easy to fetishize.

Billy got over Heather because Evie passed him moments later with his tongue down some Ridgemont girl's throat.

The boy was all mouth and hands. Sucked face like a fucking giant squid attacking a ship at sea.

"*Tck. Fucking Cthulhu.*" She got away from that, drank more to forget.

Heather pulled her friend into the dancing. Lights blasting all directions. Music pulsed. Couple more drinks and they were stumbling to Heather's place. Sneaking up the stairs to fall into a queen sized bed.

"Can't believe we didn't wake my parents." Heather rolled to her front, smudged the pillow with makeup. Evie was on her side snickering. "Hey, you'd tell me if something was wrong, right?"

"Nothing is wrong." Brown eyes blinked. Heather nuzzled her pillow and breathed even, searching.

"You changed last year. After, what happened at home... I know you miss your dad." Delicate fingertips ran over Evie's arm. Slipped away.

"He left."

Evie remembered coming home from school. He was just gone. Clothes and all. Mona crying at the table. Pictures down. Like he never existed.

And her mother never really explained why. Just said they had problems and her dad wanted to be with someone else. He never called. Mona cried that day and hasn't cried since. Evie couldn't even remember the last thing she said to him.

People vanish. They have that power.

"After...what happened with Tannen. You got all distant with me. I just worry about you a lot." Heather's fingers curled into Evie's sleeve. "Kids are cruel, I don't understand why. Why they're so mean..."

"Some people don't know where to put it when they hate themselves."

"I don't think I hate myself. Sometimes I hate that myself isn't enough, you know? Enough to please my parents all the time and enough to help other people out."

"You're more than enough for me, Heather." Evie heard a sniffle.

"D-Do you hate yourself?" An airy tone slurred.

"I don't know." Evie sighed. "I'm fine, Heath, I'm happy. I dealt with it."

"Happy or pretending to be?" Heather mused, pulling at her hair scrunchie to relieve brown locks. "I just don't see you a lot, like you're always with someone else. You never wanted to hang out over the summer."

"I'm just busy with stuff, it's nothing." Evie peered at the walls plastered in their friendship. Felt every smiling version of herself in those old photographs wince at her lies. Stars exploding in total silence.

"You're going to leave Hawkins and sing your songs for people on a stage. You're going to be world famous and I'll get to point and say, that's my best friend." Heather grinned. "Keep breaking that shell. I can help you."

"I'll try." Evie scoffed. "You're so drunk."

"I am..." Heather hummed. "Just talk to me, okay? I want you to be so happy again. Like we used to be when we'd go to the park. Play on swing sets."

"I won't shut you out." She replied as Heather settled, started to snore. "Goodnight, Heath."

“M’night.”

** ** *

Billy was still raging into that night. Stumbled out of a bedroom pulling his tee back on, rooting around for his jacket. Most kids were starting to pass out on floors and couches.

“Hey, this belong to you?” Brock plucked up leather so Billy snatched it. “Good to see you, Hargrove. You know, they say Hawkins would have finished out the basketball season with the title if you stayed on the team.”

“They played favorites. Got sick of it.” Billy passed him, lightning a cigarette.

“Come outside, sit with the guys.” Brock cocked his head, square jaw setting when he smiled.

“Hey, B.” Tommy was stoned out of his mind. Looked at Billy like he was trying to find him in a haystack. Not with Carol so they must have had some fight.

Billy eyed the clear covered pool. Lights played up to touch his face before he plopped into a metal chair. Boys from Hawkins and other schools gathered around a glass table, drinking and shooting the shit. A joint was passed. Mostly rich, sporty types.

“Hargrove. Hear you’re the Hawkins Keg King. What the hell happened with Harrington?” Brock faked interest, hands clasped.

“Crashed and burned, man.” Tommy chortled, smacking Billy’s arm.

“Who?” Just play dumb.

“Don’t play coy, man, we all know you beat the shit out of him. Knocked the pretty boy down a few pegs.” Brock only grinned there. “So, you’re in the circle now.”

“Oooh, do I get a medal?” Billy flicked his smoke aside and swiped Tommy’s beer to drink.

"I like this guy, Hagan."

"We can trust him." Tommy winked, sitting back.

"You're not going to hunt me for sport, are you?" Billy inhaled sharper, unworried. Laughter erupted.

"It's funny you say that," Brock took the floor, "because we are going to let you in on the deepest secret between the high schools. Something that brings all the boys together. Hawkins. Ridgemont. Hill Valley. Bates. We have this little tradition we do between Homecoming and Prom."

"Skirt Safari." Brock's right hand man chuckled, sucking the joint down. Few boys echoed it with laughter.

"The hell is that?" Billy drank, shaking his hair out.

"Some of us guys throw this big dance party. Rent out a nice place in town, pour some good money into a pool." Brock shrugged. "You take a girl and we vote."

"Vote?" Billy puffed. More cruel smiles.

"Yeah, on which girl is the ugliest beast." Hyena cackling followed. Billy just stared with his brow raised.

"Ah...What the fuck is this? Are you joking?"

"Open season, man." Another boy chimed in.

"Walk with me, Hargrove, you have something special about you." Brock got up, swiped the joint to finish it. Billy looked irritated and followed. Fresh air cleared his head. Behind them, teens chattered. "I think you'll fit right in here. You live on Cherry Lane, right?"

"What's it to you?" Billy chucked the beer aside.

"Next to that Fenny girl. Kinda cute in her new little outfits if you like something extra to grab onto." Brock shrugged. Turned from Billy to eye the sky clearing up.

“Didn’t she beat your ass last year?” A sly grin crossed.

“Ah, you heard. Rumors have been exaggerated. Just like you and Harrington I’m sure. Getting booted from the team over a tiff.”

“I left on my own, fuck them.”

“Fenny had a thing for me and I said no because I was with someone, so she got emotional. Girls are like that. They get attached and upset when we don’t give them what they need.” Brock stuffed his hands into his pockets. “She’s untouched, you know, so I heard. Flaunting her shit now and not letting us grab the goods. Asking for it man, but too afraid to follow through. I hate that teasing shit. They say the bookworms are wild in the sack. Bet you that musical girl can sing too.”

“You obsessed with her now and her *little outfits*?” That earned Billy a brief heated expression. The boy was more observant than he was given credit for.

“I just wanted to raise a challenge for you. Get Fenny to go to Skirt Safari as your date. New Years Eve, we’ll give you the address. Kiss her before the clock strikes twelve. She won’t earn you the win, but I’ll bet you money that you can’t get the famous ice queen to go.”

“Man, this is so fucking stupid.” Billy clearly didn’t fit with this crowd of uppity shits. Heels spun to go.

“Is three hundred dollars stupid?” Brock watched Billy skid. Blue eyes shifting to see him again. “Ah, I have your attention.”

“Cash?” Billy could use it. Three hundred would go far for him. Brock Tannen knew that immediately about him.

“I can show it to you if you like.” Brock displayed his teeth, almost glowing and sharp. “Show us that Hargrove charm and break the unbreakable. If you’re the Keg King. Prove it. Let us see you in action.”

“I take her to the shitty party and you give me three hundred bucks?” Billy asked carefully, eyes darting. “She doesn’t have to find out about this vote shit you guys do?”

"No, not a word from us. I'll even pay your end of the pool as a token. Just an innocent kiss before the ball drops. You don't have to screw her, unless she's your thing. Easy enough?" Brock held out his hand. Billy eyed the campy bunny chain around Tannen's neck, huffed out his nose.

Took the offer with a hard expression.

"Deal."

** ** *

Evie rubbed her eyes the next morning and said bye to Heather, raking fingers through curls as she was dropped off. Jacket pulled close while she fumbled for keys and Heather drove off.

Not even a second after, a blue Camaro was pulling up next door.

It was annoying how great Billy looked even with a hangover after a hard night of partying. He stunk of beer and smoke and his hair was ratted, but glowy as always. Evie groaned when he spotted her and got the key in the door.

"Hey, Evie." Was that her name he just used? "Hey, wait up." Boots clicked to hurry toward her house. A stronger hand yanked the front door closed and Billy held his ground there. "Wait a second, I'm trying to talk to you."

"Aren't we both too hungover for this?" Already on the defensive. Makeup smeared around her eyes. She turned, applying some chapstick and sighed out. "What?"

"Look." Billy pushed his hands into his back pockets, eyes flicking away and back. "It was a dick move. The whole Heather thing."

"Yeah." She waited for him to go on.

"And I'm..." *Sorry?* "It was shitty." He craned down toward her. "The stuff I said, I was fucking wasted."

"And you're..." She tried to spell the word out with her eyes. Billy blinked innocently.

"An asshole."

Evie flattened.

"Yes, but not what I was...ah, look, it doesn't matter. I was drunk and I jabbed too. And I am...sorry." A shrug before she tried the door again.

Billy pulled it shut once more like this was a game, earning a sigh of irritation.

"I'm still talking at you. I was...I am...a shithead." He couldn't wrap his squid tongue around a fucking apology. *Christ.*

Evie looked expectantly, leaning in as if more should come.

Billy sucked at this so he decided to jump right in.

"I wanted to make it up to you. There's this dance up in the city. Real bar. Real drinks. New Years Eve bash. Go with me." It sounded like an order.

"Go with you?" She blinked in shock. Grew pointed. "Ah, no, Billy." Evie got her front door open again and pushed by him. Wondered if he was used to rejection in any form. So, she pushed pride aside. "But, Heather thinks you're cute okay. Just ask her. It's fine."

She got around the door and hid half behind it. Billy's hand went flat to stop it from shutting.

"I don't want to ask Heather, I'm asking you." He shrugged with big eyes. Bet ladies fell for it. Evie searched him, beyond confused. She hated confusion. It was too much. "You're single, it's this or some lame ass high school party."

He noted she opened her mouth and decided not to protest the single part. The hesitation was odd.

"I...I happen to like lame ass high school parties." She stammered out.

"Oh, sure." He winked.

"Y-Yeah, I just love them actually because kids our age are very stupid. It's better than public television."

"Right. Right." He sounded not convinced.

"And, you're Billy Hargrove so any girl will jump at the chance, just ask-"

"I'm asking you, Angel. Deal with it." He lowered his tone and got closer. Flashed a darling smile then bit his lip. Slid that tongue over it. "Don't make me beg. You know I will."

"You...I... Look, I'm...flattered but, I can't. I, uh, have a thing." Her voice trailed off. "Sorry." The door shut.

Billy gave this growl low in his throat.

"We have time, Fenny, I'm fine asking again." His voice picked up. Silence. "All you gotta do is nod that pretty head of yours."

Billy knew she heard it. He turned and dropped the grin when he spotted Max there on the sidewalk, skateboard in hand. Watching.

"Are you asking Evie out?" She narrowed on him.

"Mind your fucking business, shitbird." Billy stepped off the porch. "She's going to a party with me."

"Sounded like she just said no to you."

Billy swerved to get angry. Remembered a nail bat crashing between his legs. Shut his mouth.

"Whatever." A puff.

"She's nice," Max trailed after him, "you should, you know...ask her to something if you... She's cool. Cooler than you."

He slowed, eyebrow raising.

"Doesn't matter."

"It's Saturday." Max explained, red hair catching the sunlight to flame up.

"I know what day it is, Max, leave me alone." Billy was going up toward their house.

"She probably said no because you stink so bad."

"What the fuck?" He wheeled around again, chest puffing.

Max smirked at him and Billy found himself matching it. *Bold little shit.*

"I know what I said. And it's *Saturday*, that means she'll probably be helping her mom at that salon later. You should shower and show up. Girls like spontaneous stuff, it's thoughtful and you suck at that."

Billy scrunched at her.

"Since when do you care about...?"

"About what?" She shuffled there on the grass. Peered at Neil's car in the driveway. "We're family now whether we like it or not. Which means I'm stuck looking out for you. Right, Billy?" Max dropped her skateboard, popping it up with one foot. "I like Evie and I don't want my brother being a jerk to her. Or anyone."

Billy scoffed, near amused.

"Right." He grumbled. Went up and paused to turn once more. "Max."

"Yeah?" She readied to ride off.

"Watch the board around my damn car, will you?" Billy heard her snort. "I got shit to do now, stay out of the way."

"Take a shower and show up. Try asking instead of telling. See what happens." Max rode off with a clatter of wheels on concrete. He only shook his head again. Smiled to himself without thinking before he went in.

Billy decided to take the advise on all accounts. She'd go with him.

Certainty crept the more he looked at himself in the mirror and applied his aftershave. Maybe he forced the feeling so often, it was second nature. Fuck, looking at his reflection was never this difficult. Evie's words rang harder this morning.

He didn't blame her for once.

All these false fronts Billy showed the world. Old photographs flashing like a million dead stars. That was all we ever saw of them. Somewhere else, Evie heard those same stars dying too. Decayed and twinkling too pretty even still. It sounded almost like a cruel fate.

A tongue swept over his lips before he tried something new. Eyes averting to speak quietly like someone might hear. Fingers twisting the silver ring about his middle finger.

"Sorry."

He resumed fixing his curls. Polished up that Hargrove charm until it shined bright.

What Evangeline Fenny didn't know couldn't possibly hurt her, Billy reasoned.

Right?

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading, chat with me about this new story below!

3. To The Devil

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! Enjoy the chapter. Billy trying again to woo Evie. They strike up a bet. TW: Pica. Light fatphobia.

“Hey, Karen, here for the two o’clock?” Evie was jotting down slanted notes at reception, crossing the name off. Mona’s salon smelled of mousse and hairspray. Fans blared to keep the air moving. Karen beamed back.

“I am. Need a touch up.” She touched her waves to give them a flick. “I’m so jealous of your curls, how do you get them to sit like that?”

“Genetics, I’m afraid. Ah, I just dip myself in water and pray for the best.” The dry humor she was known for. “Mom has them too, if only she didn’t inject a gallon of product into her hair every morning.”

“Water. Innovative. Your secret is safe with me.” Karen paused to laugh when Evie grinned, nodding as she finished the notes.

“Seat four, Claudia’s getting your stuff ready now.” A smile beamed.

“Thanks, sweetie. Your mom in back too?”

“Yeah, fixing the music, she’ll be out in a sec.” Evie flicked a page and peered around. Yellow walls with baby blue trim. Similar to a dollhouse her mother made once. Too many plants to count, but that was Evie’s fault.

She did rounds and cared for each one. Even the new bloom of begonias in one of the back rooms hanging just out a window. Twisting silk petals all blushed and unfurled.

Evie watered them, let the soil grow damp. Listened to the thumping of a dryer full of towels behind her in the cramped space. A rhythm she could write a song to. She saw a fallen petal and plucked it up. Felt the baby smooth texture between her finger pads.

Lifted it idly to her cheek. Let it caress her skin in one graze. It comforted, the mere touch of it. And the calm stillness that followed as if someone was holding her welled euphoria. The petal ran her lips, she felt in control of her senses. This touch that was warm and ticklish. Evie gave a shuddered breath and just wondered.

Wondered.

Evie spent too much of her life wondering.

The petal touched her tongue and she half expected it to melt like a chocolate. Rich and silky. She rolled it damp around her mouth. Chewed for an earthy twang. Looking at the flowers. Feeling them across her running palms. Gently bouncing into place before she swallowed. Evie turned quick, jolting back into her skin for one fleeting moment.

She was aware again. She was here. Still patting her cheek to stay grounded. Maybe the flowers would bloom a dainty beauty inside her. A delicate sensibility that's evaded her all this life. Another flower petal plucked.

He loves me.

He loves me not.

Fingers pulled a begonia clean. Chanted the little game in her head.

He loves me.

Swallowed. There was a slight of guilt. She'd stolen the power from this living thing and brought it into her own being. That washed away. She was carrying it now. Patting her cheek again to console herself.

No one noticed Evie hidden in the back room. Indulging in control. It felt like a dirty school girl secret. Evie dipped her fingers into the wet soil. Sighed and let the earth fall back into the plot. She brought them up to see the filth. Thought to lick herself clean.

"Evie, can you bring the broom out?" A voice had her heart bursting. Evie yanked the watering can close, feeling the weight of

liquid slosh. Her mother was next door fussing with music still. Blissfully unaware. Their usual relationship.

“Y-Yes!” She felt this shame etch her spine. The rush of being caught doing something she shouldn’t have. Which Evie Fenny was already no stranger to. She washed the evidence away and snatched a broom handle. “Coming!”

“Thanks, honey.” Claudia took it and let Evie go about her business. Watering the last few pots at reception.

The bell dinged right behind her as she stretched to water a pot above the door hanging from the ceiling, tip toeing upon a wooden stool.

Billy stood there, face at ass level and didn’t stop her. Not that he minded the view. A pink frilly apron over her violet dress. Black tights and belt to match. Big shiny hoops dangling caught the light above her, illuminating dark hair with a halo. Curls shifted and she eyed Billy Hargrove at the same time the music blasted back up. Dolly Parton of course.

Here you come again

Just when I've begun to get myself together

"Angel...what a view." His bright eyes scanned, full of glittery stars. Tongue crossing pink lips in a vaguely obscene way.

“Billy?” She hitched a breathy gasp and stumbled. Braced to fall on her ass before an arm swooped out to stop her. Muscles pulled Evie into a chest. A very cologned, hard chest. Those damn stars danced like she was in a movie, draped into Billy with the watering can clutched tight. Shifting around. Air sent their hair up and the door shut.

Dolly’s lyric timing was really the worst.

You waltz right in the door

Just like you've done before

And wrap my heart 'round your little finger...

Billy and his long lashes. Fluttering so pretty at her. Pulling her flush into the metalwork of his hot body. Evie lost herself.

Swept up in his arms with no words. No synapses obeying her body's commands. She choked there looking like the cover of a romance novel. Blushed at him. Flowers in full bloom.

"You won't soak my head if I make a joke about you falling from heaven, will you?"

There he is. Evie rolled her eyes and found her footing.

"Oh, but I will." Hands pushed him to arm's length. No thank you followed.

"Hon, you alright?" Claudia had dropped her shampoo bottle. Few women echoed the call, eyes on the gorgeous boy who just strode in. Evie was quick to step from him.

"Fine, fine, I'm..." Evie brushed herself awkwardly and went around the reception counter. Mostly to put distance between them, setting the can aside. Billy followed after to lean against the wood so she kept her voice low. "What are you doing here?"

"I got bored." He crossed his arms there to shrug, dressed to the nines and hair all done up. Eyes flicking. "Nice apron."

Evie scowled at him.

"If you're asking me to that party again, the answer is still-"

"Billy! How nice of you to visit, I hope I see Susan in here again soon." Mona swept toward them. Both teens leaned out from each other. Billy flashed his teeth, all charm.

"She's never felt better since coming in for the new do. Made my old man crazy." He ignored Evie glaring at him.

"That's what I love to hear." Mona came up to pat his cheek. Billy slid his eyes to her daughter. "What can we do for you?" She touched

golden hair to sweep it aside. Mona was just the friendly sort. "You know, we do boy's hair too. All the time. You look like you take care of these darling curls."

"I'll keep that in mind, but actually I was just walking by and I saw Evie in her apron and thought we'd hit that burger joint for lunch." His shiny teeth flashed to smile so Evie cut in.

"*And*," her voice rose, "I was just carefully explaining to Billy that we're super swamped today. I couldn't possibly go. Shucks."

Both Mona and Billy peered to see exactly three customers getting their hair done. No one outside. The appointment book near empty too.

"So *busy*." Evie pressed her teeth, eyebrows lifting for her mother to get the hint. "Extremely."

She didn't.

"Oh, no, Evie. It's your winter break." Arms waved at her daughter. Near ready to give Billy Evie's hand in marriage. "Go have some fun with the nice young man."

What a laugh.

"Are you sure? I can stay...*literally* all day here. I can move in here and never have to leave ever. Never. Ever." Evie was getting her apron snatched off by her mother. A couple shoves got her around the counter.

"No, no. Go, shoo, have fun with a boy. Good to see you, Billy. Tell your parents that I said, hi. Have Susan bring your little sister in next time. What I wouldn't give to style that pretty red hair she has."

"I'll let them know." Billy actually held the door for Evie as she shrugged on her coat. Another heated expression before she huffed and went out. Ire. He can work with that. "Bye, ladies." A wink.

"Bye, Billy." Came the chorus. Both teens grinned all the way to the end of the window before hands snatched Billy's collar when they were out of sight.

“What the hell are you doing, Billy?” Evie shook him by the leather jacket. Even the scrunching snarl at him was cute. Actually had his taller, broad frame pressed into a brick wall. Made Billy pause to observe her face. Mauve lips frowned deeper.

This was a cruel thing and she couldn't stand it. This back and forth. These sides of Billy that only came out when it suited him best.

“Making it up to you. *Christ*, just fucking let me. Easy...” He shrugged off, going around her. She was being difficult about this, maybe rightfully so, but it still gnawed at him.

“C'mon.” Billy went on. Not bothered by the cold in his white button up shirt and jeans. Tucked and tight. The gold saint chain bounced against his chest as he walked. Hard, intent steps with a lazy wave. “You like burgers? Who doesn't, I'm hungry.”

“I don't need you to make it up to me, Billy.” She trailed after him. “This weird game you're playing really doesn't interest me.”

“This town is so fucking boring. You know that?” He spoke instead, clicking his tongue and looking beyond them. “Got nothing to do, why not hang out? We're neighbors.”

“When have you acted like a neighbor?”

“Right fucking now, Angel.” Blue eyes shifted to spot the right building.

He was such an ass and she was still willingly walking beside him.

“Ask Tommy or Carol to hang out.”

“No one likes Tommy or Carol, would you want to hang out with them in your free time? Fucking annoying. Carol wants to fuck me and Tommy? ...You know, he might want to fuck me too. I'm the whole package.”

“So, you're with me because I'm not annoying like them and I don't want to fuck you?”

Billy turned sharp to see her at the crosswalk. Golden curls swept

up. Almost offended.

“Who said you didn’t want to fuck me?” The shit asked it so genuinely too. “I never said that.”

“Literally me, just now.” She pressed the walk button because he had her under a spell and Billy went before it changed. “Ugh.” Evie, ignoring her better judgment, paced after him. Street was empty.

“You’re plenty annoying, Fenny.” Billy strode inside the diner and didn’t wait before he grabbed a table. Slapped a plastic menu down across the way until she moved to take the offered seat. A waitress appeared from nothing, but Evie figured Billy just had that effect.

“Know what you want, sugar?”

“Number three. Coke. Cheese Fries. Jalapenos on the burger and on the fries. And whatever the lady wants.” He stole an ashtray and dug for a smoke, not looking at either girl. Few people eyed them and Evie gave in.

They were both still pretty hungover and she didn’t want to make a scene. Which Billy knew well and used to his advantage.

“I will have the exact same thing.”

“Are you sure?” The waitress looked Evie up and down as she said that. Oh, so carefully. Evie paused to tense up, acutely aware that she didn’t look right across from this gorgeous, golden boy.

The thought hadn’t even struck her until it was pointed out, that’s what sobered it painfully.

“Yeah, she’s sure. We’ll take a large chocolate milkshake also. *Two* straws.” Billy snapped, flicking his menu up. The waitress bowed her head and hurried away. Evie’s jaw hung open while he played with his lighter distractedly. Eyes flicked up. “What, are you catching flies over there?” He lit a cigarette and her mouth shut.

“I’m in the fucking *Twilight Zone*.” Elbows hit the table

“That stuff you said Heather liked...” Billy tapped his ashes. Ignored

the waitress when she set Cokes down. "That was about you, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Museums and horror flicks. Noted." He shrugged. "You into that poetry shit? Always writing."

"Song lyrics." Evie took a breath and answered slower. This was weird. It was weird that...it wasn't so weird all the sudden. Billy did what suited him. Blue eyes lingering on her then darting all over. He sat back with one boot up on the seat. Actually listening. Smoking. Present. "I play guitar and sing."

Yeah, he heard her guitar from his window every other night if it was open.

"You're always writing too," she went on, "I know it isn't school work." Observant.

"I'd rather write some shitty story than listen to a lecture about nothing in class." Billy's ashes hit the tray again. "Are you going to be the next Dolly?"

"My mom would love that." She broke to laugh at herself and sip. "More Kate Bush or Stevie Nicks."

"Thank fuck, one Dolly is enough." He snuffed his smoke out. "Why won't you go to the party with me?"

"Why do you suck with rejection?" She asked it bolder than intended. Half expected Billy to get upset and walk out. Smoke etched out his pink lips when he chuckled, catching his tongue between teeth. This girl was all four seasons in one spitting firecracker.

"You got a wall up bigger than your mom's hair, Evangeline."

"I built it myself, William, thanks." Evie smiled sweetly that time, gazes locked. He twitched at the use of his birth name. A beat of staring before food arrived.

“Will that be-?”

“Yeah, we’re good.” Billy plucked a fry up, watched melted cheese string from it before he chewed and the waitress saw herself off. “Don’t tell me you’re not gonna eat like normal in front of me.”

He caught Evie picking up a knife and fork. She shot him a look. Dropped them and stole the milkshake to sip. Passed it over for him before she went for the burger.

“There you go.”

“Stuff it.” She grabbed a fry and watched him take the biggest bite he could. Cheese drooped out the bottom. “Hangover miracle, huh.”

“Hmm.” Billy was too busy chewing. Evie took a bite, sipped more coke and decided to engage this.

“Can I ask why your dad moved you across the country during your last year of high school?”

“New bullshit job.” He went at his fries, smearing them around cheese to eat with crunching jalapenos. “Wanted to start his white picket fence over since it didn’t work the first time and he thought he could spite me in the process.”

Billy licked his thumb, eyes elsewhere.

“I’ll bet he just wanted away from memories of my mom.”

Evie paused carefully. It was the first he’d spoken of her.

“Oh.” She pulled for a napkin, eyes on her food. Peculiar how quick he got real with her here. Billy Hargrove was usually putting up thick layers of artificial bullshit. Plastic cheese on greasy fries.

“Didn’t help that I was in and out of fights.”

“That changed?” She reached for the milkshake. “So, your mom-”

“Did you really get into a fight last year?” Billy had finished the burger and was now going at his fries again, gestured so she slid the

milkshake back.

"I don't remember it well."

"Bullshit, Fenny." He smirked to himself. "I'd know. You see red and you remember how it tastes every single time."

"You're the expert." She shrugged, wiping her greasy fingers on napkins. Left a few bites of burger because a voice drilled to do so. Same with the fries. "He was a jerk and...my parents just got divorced. I was upset. I let him have it. Everyone got dramatic about it because I'm Evie Fenny and not Randy Savage."

"So, how'd it taste?" Billy looked at her eyes and saw them flash.

He's had enough! Students kept chanting that in her ear. Pulling Evie and her clawing talons out of the huge football player under her knees. She breathed pure smoke. Hair flying all directions. Felt the coolness of dewy grass and warmth of blood crusting her fingers.

"It was like..."

Descending upon Tannen like thunder. Heavy rain and cracks of lightning followed by a boom. Thunderous applause too. She stared back at Billy with a dreamy expression. Recalled cowering through rainstorms as a little girl. Into the closet where she felt safer.

Her father, Jack, always found her. He'd sit next to her in there and bring her close under one arm.

"Don't be scared, little mouse." Never could make out his smile in darkness.

"It's...hot metal. Lava pouring down your throat trying to harden inside you." She got real too and Billy's lip lifted. Soft as can be. "Like it's making a cast of you in that specific moment of rage."

Evie blinked out of the memory. Watched Billy stare again before he pushed the milkshake back to her side. A peace offering. She accepted and drank, let lipstick print on the candy cane colored straw.

"I'm going to ask you out." He decided gentler. Intent. "New Years Eve. Seven on the dot. You can show up in a nice dress when I knock and we'll go. Or not."

"You might want a back up girl." Evie sucked in her cheeks, eyes had to leave his to see the table. Thighs pressing. He'd definitely just undressed her.

"No need." Billy crossed his arms to shrug. "Don't want one. Already asked the girl I want to take. C'mon, Fenny, quit hiding and get out. What are you waiting for?"

"I'm not hiding." Evie shook her head, chest sinking. "You're the one hiding."

"Me?" His shoulders rose. Got all puffy like a peacock.

"Hawkins High King. Billy Hargrove." She lifted her hands for dramatic effect. Leaned forward to match him in intensity. "Thrashing forth in a billow of hairspray and cigarette smoke. Sun left in your wake along with a trail of broken hearts. You pose for them and they eat you up. There won't be much left..."

That sentiment kicked Billy in the chest.

"...Everything you say is layered in rage and cheese. It's mind numbing. I have a wall up, but you put up this flashy front that just blinds everyone. You want their eyes to bleed for you. Get real, Hargrove."

"I'll get as real as you want. Ask me anything." Came the challenge.

"Okay. Why'd you beat up Steve Harrington?"

"Cause he was lying to me and because I hated him." Billy shrugged, eyes averting. "Because I wanted to taste hot metal. It's home to me."

"Lying? About what?"

"Still don't know and frankly, I don't care anymore." A quick sip from his coke. "Go to the party with me."

"You just don't give up." She peered into her glass. Wanted to eat the ice cubes clicking there.

"Maybe I'm asking you not to give up on me." There was something almost sincere there like Billy was touching the earth for the first time.

"Why are you trying to trick me?" Evie pushed her cup aside even though her teeth chattered to crunch.

"Trick you?"

"This party thing." She paused when the waitress returned to clear the table. Leaving the check face down. "You've been nothing but an ass to me since you moved in. Ignored me. Probably can't even recall what I was wearing when we met."

"Your mom's hair kinda got in the way when she brought you over." He joked and didn't miss her stifle amusement, eyes rolling. "It's not a trick, we might actually have something in common."

"What's that?"

"The people in this hell town aren't very interesting. Maybe I find you interesting." His brow quirked. Fingers tapped the lacquer table.

"I don't find you all that interesting." Evie smiled that time and Billy matched it.

"That's fine. You will."

"So certain?"

"Give me a chance." Billy's eyes flicked over her before he sat up. Didn't miss a damn beat. "You wore red button up shirt tucked into a little denim skirt with suspenders. Black tights. Grey shoes. Sunglasses with big white cat frames. That same gold necklace with the music note and dangle earrings to match. You introduced yourself with your mom. Took the sunglasses off and even had gold on your eyelids too. I remember it."

"Yeah?" Her lips parted with the audible breath he stole. And oh so

easily. Evie leaned closer so he followed. Hooded eyes all aflutter.

"Made your eyes look..." Billy searched. "Molten. Volcanic like."

"Molten?" Evie wasn't even hearing herself anymore.

"Just, I don't fucking know, warm like..." The beach. California. Home. Billy lost the thought and licked his lips. "You just looked painted."

"Painted?" Evie had mused then. Entertained now at his odd way of description. Tried not to think about Billy running a wet paintbrush down her bare neck.

"Yeah." Billy breathed slower. Painted. With the autumn breeze and sun in her hair, slowly brushing curls around those full, tinting cheeks. A subject the fucking Pre Raphaelites would have lost their shit over and painted all seasons. He could picture Evie floating in an endless pool being kissed by fallen flower petals. Draped in miles of iridescent chiffon reclined in emerald green grass. Looking straight at the viewer with intensity and still dreaming all the same.

"You had on a black tee. Jeans. Your saint chain. A pair of aviators tucked into your denim coat pocket." Evie peered under the table. "Same boots... You looked like you wanted to be literally anywhere else."

"That'd be the truth. Wasn't you or your mom's chipper greeting." Billy was looking down now. "Just realized I couldn't see the ocean anymore is all. You held out your hand and I ignored it because I'm an asshole. We established that this morning and now I'm making it up to you."

"And you still peeked at my chest." Evie flashed a cheekier smile. "Said your name only after Neil gave you this hard stare. Max sped by on a skateboard, you must have thought I was distracted. But, I caught you."

"I did check your tits out, sue me. I have eyes. You have tits. The world spins." He smacked a couple bills down as she went through her pockets. The spell on them both shattered to rain. "Already paid."

Let's go, the waitress is staring at us. We'll make a grand exit, huh?"

"But—" Evie stopped when he grasped her wrist and pulled her up into his side. Spied the waitress scowling as he held her hip and they went out. Got away from the window before she pulled from him. "Get your mitts off me, Hargrove."

"Still open for questions." He sniffed and they went back down the street. Another smoke was lit.

"Okay. I'll go for the obvious. Do you think we look funny together?" She crossed her arms when Billy leaned against the side of his car.

"Who cares. You're making a big deal over nothing. It's just a party."

"The world cares. That waitress back there. Kids at school." She shrugged.

"You." He clicked his tongue, head tilting.

"I don't care."

"That's why you don't want to go to the party with me, you're stuck on what they'll think." He pointed with the red hot cherry of his cigarette. "Fuck 'em. As your Louisiana folk would say: to the devil with false modesty." He mocked her mother's accent with that.

"Maybe, it's because you've been a jerk to me. That reason enough?" Evie dropped her arms and Billy paused to nod, inhaling. "I don't know what this is, Billy, but...just stop it. Ask someone else." She eyed her mom's salon and took a few steps back. "Thanks for lunch. I gotta go, my mom won't turn this place over to the evening girl unless forced."

"Can't tell me what to do, Angel." He stood taller. "I'll bet you another Coke that Mona invites me to dinner tonight. TV included."

Evie gaped at him.

"A Coke?"

"I'm easy to please. I'm gonna come to your house for dinner. Hour of TV at least." He cocked his head. So full of pride.

"Why are you dragging this day out?" She turned to face him again.

"I want to meet your cat." Billy wrapped his lips around the smoke. Exhaled after. "That little creep stares at me from your window day in and out."

"He doesn't like boys."

"Bet he'll like me."

"I bet he won't. He'll stay in his bed and not spare you the time. It'll hurt your ego." Evie came to Billy with her own certainty.

Bourbon was old. He liked to sleep, have his ears scratched, and purr. A lot. He hid when company came and keeps a safe distance once wandering out.

"Oh, another challenge. Okay, Fenny. We're doing this." Billy came to her, flicking his smoke to crush it under the toe of his boot. Cold wind blew. "When I come to dinner tonight-"

"If." She corrected.

"*When* Mona invites me with her beat to hell Louisiana accent," Billy insisted, "you get to play hostess. If that cat takes a liking to me, you're going to the New Years party with a Hargrove." He towered there and studied her.

"And that's if you can even set foot into my house... It's not a date. The dance."

"What do you have to lose here?" Billy offered his hand and Evie eyed him suspiciously. Lips pursed before she reached to take it. His other broad palm came up to prolong it, engulfed hers before he leaned in even closer. Whispering and sultry. "Oh, and literally everyone in that place is already staring at us. We look just fine together, Evangeline. To the devil."

Evie hitched a breath. Inhaled his cologne and twisted to see many

eyes snap aside behind the glass.

“Ah, shit.” She tugged from his warm palms and went inside. Billy, cool and collected, trailed after. He cleared his throat and spoke up.

“I just really don’t want to impose, Angel.” The tone changed and her body locked, turning to question it before her mother replied at reception first.

“Impose?” Mona blinked, snapping a book shut.

“I-”

“Your daughter kindly invited me to dinner, I figured it was too short notice for her lovely mother.” Billy made a thing of it to sigh with longing. “Any other day, I’d-”

Evie's entire face scrunched at him. Cheeks red like strawberries when her jaw set.

“Oh, no! You’re always welcome. We’re having Swedish meatballs. Easy thing to whip up. I always make so much extra, don’t I, Evie?”

Evie Fenny hated Billy Hargrove. Officially and totally. Hated his smug little face.

Her tongue clicked at him.

“*Mm hm.*”

Billy only smiled, winking. Too easy.

“What a wonderful idea to invite him, baby. I’m going to be headed home soon. We might have a late meal. Is eight alright for you?” Mona tucked Evie’s curls behind her ear and flashed a hundred watt grin.

“Eight is perfect, Ms. Fenny.” Billy charmed the entire room. Except the painted, plush storm cloud in front of him. “I also have to say, has anyone ever told you that you look like a brunette Dolly Parton?”

The woman about squealed at him.

"You know, I get it sometimes." She touched her collar with one hand and pushed at him. "Does your family want to come over for dinner?"

"Unfortunately, no. My dad is taking Susan out. You know, date night. Max is spending the night at a friend's house. Police Chief's new kid. So, I'm all alone tonight."

"Well, not anymore, come over and I'll get you fed. My door is always open, Billy." Mona tapped his chin. "Eight o'clock sharp."

"I'll be there." He turned to Evie. Speechless. Voice lowered as he leaned in to brush one knuckle along her jawline. "And I'll be seeing you, Angel."

Billy seemed to linger for her to say something more, finger curling into unruly locks.

"To the devil." She uttered with pointed brown eyes. Unable to leave him.

The curl bounced back into place. Billy heard her lungs sputter with need and bit his lip, sly. A final wink just for Evie.

One bell and he was gone.

"Mom." Evie broke to moan and pull herself back together, following. "Why?"

"Why, what? Let the boy come over for dinner." She plucked up a comb to put some finishing touches on a woman's hairdo, nodding to her stylist.

"He's trouble, you know about him. The whole town does."

"Sweetheart, we're always going to be hospitable. Especially to troubled souls. It's what Dolly and the Bible would have wanted." That was always Mona's sound advice.

"*Christ.*"

"Evangeline." Mona shot her a look. Fussed. "Do not take that tone

with the Lord, young lady.”

“I’m sorry, just,” she blew air out her lips and whined, “I can’t stand him.”

“Seemed awful cozy out there or have I gone blind now? All the smiles and nicknames.”

Evie bit her tongue at that because there was plenty Mona chose not to see.

“Billy does that, he tricks you and then steps on you because it’s a game to him.”

“Maybe he’s trying to do better. I know he gotten into some trouble, but what do I always tell you?”

Evie crossed her arms tight, hip cocked. Monotone.

“You’d tell me Dolly would want us to see the light of a clear blue morning.”

“And has Dolly ever steered me wrong?” Mona pointed with the comb before she fluffed the locks up. “Perfect, go ahead and finish this. Good work, dear.”

“Thanks, Miss Mona.” A new hire moved to finish, pushing large glasses up her nose. Mona went around them and Evie followed.

“I know, I know. Be brave and kind. Honest and always open your heart. Blah. I’ll be civil if he is.”

“Oh honey, let a boy be nice to you once in awhile. You might like it.”

“Pssh. Find me one first.” Evie passed her mom to get her bag. “They only get nice when they’re older and mature.”

“I wouldn’t always bet on that, baby.” Mona replied softer than intended. “Cruelty takes so many forms, that’s how it seeps into our lives so easily. It’s a comfort.”

Evie didn't find something to argue with there. Just watched her mother's back tense.

Let the words flutter like silken petals on the wind.

To the damn devil.

Notes for the Chapter:

The kind reception on this fic is so loved, thank you all! Chat below if you can. My tumblr is Alias-B :)

4. No Day But Today

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello all! Pushing out a baby chapter early so I can focus on my other fic! Thank you so much for the support on this fic. Billy goes to dinner and Tries It. That's the chapter. :D

“Claudia, do you have the keys?” Mona crossed the salon floor.

“I do, we’re fine here, go on. Dusty is spending the night at the Wheeler’s place. Having some castle and dragons party.” She’d gushed.

“Feel free to close up early if we’re dead the last hour. Thanks, sugar.” Mona patted her back as she followed Evie out the door.

“Can I drive?”

“I was hoping you’d ask.” Mona smiled.

Evie was saving for a car. And college. And her future.

And it was a lot.

Truthfully, she didn’t care for school. It was in the way. Wished her lyrics could carry her straight to the red carpet before all those flashing paparazzi.

Wanting to unwind, Evie hid in her room when she got home. Shut the curtains and prodded at herself before the vanity. Sorted dangly earrings in a mesh metal display. Huffing to lean over when Bourbon swept into her legs. His little body shivered and she plucked him up.

“Okay, BB, you’re my best guy. You can’t let me down.” She scratched under his chin, gave him a little boop on the nose. “You take one look at that walking Def Leppard poster and you hiss and run. Got it?”

A purr.

“Good boy. You’re my only hope here. We can’t lose. Not to Billy Hargrove.” Arms let him down. She’d feel this sentiment often about Billy. A sigh. Evie applied a fresh lip color and paused. “Ugh.” She pushed up and didn’t change. Did her school work to get it out of the way and wandered out, turning the TV on to some game show. The savory smell of dinner wafted. “Need help here, Mom?” One tug and the ceiling fan spun, cycling cooler air.

“No, I have it. You can set the table for me.” Mona drained some noodles.

“Got it.” Plates and cutlery clicked around. Evie slid everything into place, perked up when the doorbell rang. Mona turned and smiled as her daughter adjusted fabric and fixed curls into place all the way to the door.

Evie half expected Billy to not even show. But, there he was. Sly smile and all. Billow of date night cologne. A vision in moonlight.

“Hey.” Evie said slowly. The surprise evident.

“Hey.” He mirrored it.

“You’re here.” An exhale out. He blinked, found himself again.

“I was gonna steal flowers from the old lady’s garden across the way, but there’s a huge opossum in her trash guarding it.” He tilted his head, earring catching the porch light and she cracked a grin.

“Big Ben? Yeah, he’s the neighborhood menace. Chief Hopper’s nemesis because they get so many calls about it. You’d be a hero if you took him on.” Evie persuaded lighter. His face fell.

“I’m not trying to die in Hawkins, Indiana. That thing was bigger than anyone on our football team.”

“Color me impressed. King Billy didn’t want to do battle for the first time?” She actually teased him. Her nose crinkled when she smiled. *Cute*. “Shock and awe.”

Billy felt this tug pulse up his ribcage. Pulled a genuine chuckle from his lips. He had to look away to give it. Glow in starlight.

"Sometimes I surprise people. I know my weight class and the pests here look like they were grown and mutated in some lab." He shrugged into the door frame with one fist lifted, clicking his lighter shut. Hooded eyes all over. Evie went still as he leaned forward to her face with his tone lowering. "Am I allowed inside? *Pretty please?*"

"With cherries on top?" Bright, wet lips parted. His lashes fluttered, a baritone sinking. Bringing her with him.

"With anything your heart desires on top." Smooth.

"Huh. I guess. For now." Evie stepped out of the way. "We go to school with plenty of those lab grown pests by the way."

"No kidding." Billy shrugged his jacket off and she awkwardly reached to take it. Hung it up behind her.

Evie turned to see him staring again and swallowed a hard lump down. Thought maybe he saw all the begonias blooming behind her eyes and up her throat.

"Billy." Mona came out of the kitchen, arms out. "So glad you're here."

"You saved me from a sad date with a TV dinner." Billy winked, charming Ms. Fenny to bits. She giggled and shook her hair out.

"Dinner's got about ten minutes. Why don't you show him around, baby?" Mona hurried back off, leaving them alone again.

"Tour? Great idea." He peered behind Evie. A mission at hand. "Where's the cat?"

"Hiding from you, clearly." Evie beamed, gesturing. "Welcome to the living room. Mom's showroom is a better word."

"Your mom like tchotchkes or what?" He came to the full mantle. Scanning.

"How'd you guess?" Evie reluctantly trailed to his side.

It was strange to let this boy wander around and see little bits of

her life. Guess things about her as he went along, trailing deft fingers about the fireplace. She wondered what was blooming within the pit of his stomach, if anything.

Mona Fenny's house overwhelmed.

Photographs, plants, and crafts. Little porcelain figurines. Too many handmade candles. Crochet projects. A full dollhouse on a table in the corner.

"My grandma passed a lot of craft skills down. She owned this amazingly strange trinket and voodoo shop in New Orleans that my aunts run now after Nana died."

"Your mom didn't stay for a piece of that?" Billy let his eyes trail over every little thing.

"Ah, I don't know. She was the baby and married pretty young. Seemed like she wanted something new," Evie peered behind her and whispered. "Never really got along with Nana like her older sisters did."

Billy hummed a little. Decided not to pry with Mona in the next room. Evie brought him to the corner and flicked a lamp on.

"Mom's dollhouse is her pride and joy. Lights up and everything."

"Tell me why your mother has a framed photograph of Dolly Parton next to a picture of you two on the fireplace. And the same photo shrunk down in the dollhouse?"

"Science may tell us the truth one day when the world is ready. And I fear for that day." She replied in all seriousness and Billy snorted. Laughing.

A truly enchanting sound Evie decided she liked.

"And I have to say," he plucked a photo off a bookshelf with a broad grin, "this one is my favorite."

One of Evie on Halloween. Had to be about six. Dressed in the campiest pink daisy costume with a huge toothy smile.

“Gah,” she cringed and swiped it from his hand, “this house is a museum of embarrassment.”

“You’re into the museum shit, guess this is like our first-” Billy stopped himself from producing the damning word when Evie turned. Blushing. *Oof*. He scratched the back of his neck. “So, uh, you got a bedroom in here or do you sleep in the dollhouse?”

“You won’t find the cat that easily.” She caught him peering around again and led him past the kitchen. “C’mon, not much to the rest of the house. Garage. Spare room.” That used to be her dad’s office space. “Mom’s room. Attic up there and on this end. My cat’s room that he lets me stay in too.”

The door was open so Billy prodded it to peek inside. Evie exhaled and flicked the light on.

It didn’t feel like a teenage girl’s bedroom. Not covered in decorations and pictures like the rest of the house. No posters cut from magazines covered in pink lipstick kisses.

A vanity full of disorganized makeup. Desk. Overfilled bookcase of novels and tapes. Crafts and trinkets she collected in labeled tin boxes. Dresser covered in jewelry. Music player. Bed. Closet. Couple of pictures taped by the vanity and headboard. Mostly Evie and Heather laughing and bright. Her beloved acoustic guitar propped in the corner.

It felt like it was decorated by one trying to take up as little space as possible. Everything was compacted. Billy eyed the wall by her bed. Realized most of the papers were notes with random lyrics and words patched together.

“Yeah, I tend to jot every little thought down even when I’m half asleep and hope it makes a song eventually.” She peered aside. It felt too intimate, letting Billy shift about the space.

“Hey, everybody has a method.” Two fingers traced over a note taped up to straighten it. She caught the ring gleaming on his middle finger. “My-”

“Ah, don’t read them aloud, I may combust.”

“Oh?” Billy slunk toward her, licked his lips. A hungry way about it. Mouth watering fangs full of sweet venom. Wonder how they'd feel sinking into her throat. “Because I make you nervous, Angel?”

“No, it’s just...just...weird.” Evie pressed up into her desk. Billy closed the distance. Got within inches of her. “It’s weird.”

Repetition didn’t ease the sear of those ocean eyes drowning her too sweetly. She felt her chest fill and flutter all the way down. Flowers unfurled to be plucked and caressed. Billy pushed into the space until she was seated there on the desk. Scrambling further. Unable to climb the wall.

“You do seem nervous though, Evie.” His tone hushed. Fingers brushed her thighs and palms came to rest there. The bunched fabric of her dress barely separating them. She inhaled his cologne. Smelled peppermint from his breath. Chest heaving.

Billy knew this wasn’t part of the quest. If that’s what this was, maybe that was a nicer way to put it. Maybe rationalizing it a thousand times would help him get some sleep at night. Just show her a good night, cash in, and go home.

It still sounded shitty. Wasn't doing Evie any favors. This girl painted too many iridescent colors. They could bleed and Billy wouldn't step away if it pooled too close.

He liked to watch the blush spread across her freckled cheeks. Rose petals falling into a cool pond. Liked the way her nose scrunched when she smiled and when she was cross with him.

Billy didn't want her because she was a conquest. A challenge. Sure, she challenged him, that was part of it. And she also made him smile like he was looking at the rocking ocean waves again. Sand and wind kissing his warm skin. There was a mystery in those molten eyes he wanted to taste for himself. Maybe it was possible to just enjoy a person without strings.

To let colors bleed and swirl. To just watch it happen without fear

or judgement. To not step away from it either. Just sink right in and create those echoing ripples.

It was too sweet and peculiar, how soft Evangeline Fenny was against the hard edges of his steel frame. So sharp, it warded everyone off.

But, not Evie, she fit perfectly against him. Fire with fire. It gave them so much in this world that had forgotten them both. Freckles to count. Eyelashes to wish upon. Flesh curves and razor angles to explore.

Hell, he even enjoyed how shaken she got as he neared and how still she went when his fingers trailed up her legs.

Evie watched his muscled chest rise, the saint pendant caught the light. Looked up at his eyes and then his mouth because it couldn't be helped. Billy Hargrove filled Evie's space and lungs with sugary smoke. He was too many colors in one soul. So, he pushed further because those painted lips were big and full and right *fucking* there.

One curious taste, that couldn't hurt.

Brought his hand up toward her chin and leaned forth when...

"Dinner!"

Evie practically shoved Billy back. Scrambled up so the desk gave a rut. Bright red as he stumbled.

"Sorry." She shuddered, passing him. Smelling of amber perfume. "Coming, mom." Billy stared at the back of her hair. Blinked a couple times to pull himself together. To rationalize some.

Curiosity. A deadly thing and so sweet too.

It felt like he was dreaming and woke up sitting at the dinner table. Evie clicked a Coke in front of him, flashed a knowing expression that made him smirk before she sat down.

"Now, I left a bowl in the kitchen to cool. We always bring extra to Miss Abigail, she's three doors down." Mona was setting plates about.

"It looks amazing, Ms. Fenny." Billy even shifted a dish to help make room for another.

"Please, Billy, just Mona. Ms. Fenny was my mother and she was a harder woman." She set a glass of water down and smoothed her dress out, sitting. Billy went for his fork and his hand was snatched. Evie shot him a look as Mona reached out. "I always say grace. Don't feel pressured to join, sweetheart."

Billy peered at Evie's warm hand in his and accepted her mother's. Bowed his head a little so Mona could say her prayer.

"Bless us, oh Lord. For this and all we are about to receive, make us truly grateful. And thank you for bringing Billy to our humble table, may he truly feel welcomed in our home. Please guide and protect him. Through Christ, we pray. Amen."

"Amen." Evie offered softer. Lips lifting when Billy peered at their hands again leaving each other. Clearly not expecting such words from a neighbor.

"You'll forgive me, Billy, some people say they leave their hearts open. I just let mine fill the room." Mona settled a napkin in her lap. "May I ask, if your family is religious at all?"

"Dad's Lutheran." Which meant Susan was by default now whatever she believed before. "We don't go to church or anything."

As if Neil Hargrove could drag his son under a steeple without one of them spontaneously combusting.

"Well, that's perfectly fine." Mona cut each of her meatballs into smaller pieces which Evie mirrored. "Evie doesn't attend with me when I go. Although, the choir sure misses her voice."

"Mom..." A teenage whine, near silent as she prodded at noodles.

"She get all the solos?" Billy encouraged the pink spreading Evie's cheeks.

"Oh, every single one. She's even been asked to come sing the national anthem at minor league baseball games." Mona prattled and

Evie's head fell back.

"Mom!" Another drawn out groan. Evie sunk down lower.

"Oh, Evangeline, let your mother brag about you." Mona ignored her.

"*Yeah, Evangeline.*" He chimed in, earning a harder glare.

"Now, Billy, you've been in Hawkins just over two months?" Mona continued. Blue eyes lifted from the plate before he gave a nod. "How are you liking it? I'm sure it's such a huge change from California. You must miss the beach."

"Getting used to the cold." Billy speared a meatball and didn't sound convincing.

"I'll bet you've never seen snow before, your poor sinuses aren't going to know what to do. Anyone in your family takes ill, just give us a ring." Such a mom. "It took me a few years to get used to the cold here too. We moved when Evie was just a baby straight up from *N'aw Lins*."

Billy bit his tongue.

"What type of music do you write?" Billy asked and there was a beat when Evie realized he was looking at her. Addressing her pointedly. Maybe to make conversation and suck up to her talkative mother. Evie's back grew taut, lips opening.

"Evie's gonna be a folk singer." Mona had cut in. "Voice of an angel, she'll make it big. She's been in competitions, just one look from any talent scout and she's sold." Evie sank down again to go back to her food. Billy watched her roll a meatball around her plate like it was the most interesting thing in the room.

Mona Fenny struck Billy as a woman who always meant well. Frilly like a lace doily. So well, she steamrolled over you because she knew best. Evie barely got two syllables out before her mother was flicking her hair and boasting. A doll that constantly had the string in its voice box yanked.

Billy learned a great deal about her.

That Mona had been arrested twice in her life for marching and protesting. Civil and women's rights. She joked that she hadn't been arrested for gay rights yet, but looked forward to the inevitable. She was a pageant queen too. Stopped when she found out she was pregnant and couldn't compete after that. No bitterness there of course. She had a daughter to mold and complete the legacy now.

Mona insisted on taking the plates away. Grabbing her own, Billy's, and a side dish.

Evie was still rolling that meatball around until Billy plucked up a fork, stabbed it, and swallowed in one bite. She perked with flushed cheeks. Glared again.

Billy wanted attention.

"Your mom is friendly." Statement of the fucking millennium.

"Just wait til she busts out her old pageant scrapbooks. You'll never see home again." Evie quickly flashed a smile and picked up her own plate to follow her mother off. Billy stood too, peered around. That cat had to be close. "Give it up." Arms crossed when she leaned into the doorway working a melting ice cube around her mouth. Swallowed it whole instead of crunching. Water ran in the kitchen behind her.

"We agreed on an hour of television." Billy matched her stance, saw her hip cock.

"Half hour."

"Hour." Billy went in to sit on the couch like he owned it. Legs spread. "Come on in, the water's fine, Evangeline." Evie plucked up the remote, sat as far away from him as she could. Turned the TV on to something campy just to make him suffer.

"Fucking *Love Boat*. Really? Susan watches this crap."

"You said the full hour." Evie flashed a smug grin. "I think *The Golden Girls* is on too."

"*Love Boat* is fine." Billy lifted his hand. Swiped the remote from her to set it on the other side of him. They both sunk in there. Eyes on the screen. Mona left them alone to bring the plate to their neighbor, stayed for conversation.

Billy fidgeted. Stretching to scoot closer so he could nudge his knee into Evie's. Her face remained at total peace. She pushed back at his leg which drew slow smiles upon them both.

"What kind of music do you really like, or does your mother always do all the talking?"

"Doesn't matter." Evie felt him peer back over and held herself. A beat.

"Yeah, your dreams. They don't matter." Came sarcasm. "A girl who wants her name in lights. Don't spend too much time feeling for the switch in darkness, Angel."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just asking. You really want to sit in silence to this cheesefest? Young actresses paired with old ass grandpas playing love sick." Billy put his arm up over the couch. Missed Evie twitch. Got his hand smacked for tugging her curl like a giddy little boy.

"I don't know," Evie faced him with a shrug, "somewhere in the rock and pop area. Maybe with a touch of soul. Not the hair metal I'm sure you're into."

How beautiful she looked when she hoped.

"And my name in lights won't ever be enough, I need people to chant it too."

Lips curled at Evie.

"Better than folk music." Billy decided. Pride welled because she smiled too. Genuinely. Evie fiddled with her necklace. Delicate little music note caught the technicolor glow. Brown eyes turned to see him, she tried to bite the smile down. Failed.

“So, what’s the deal with this party thing? A dance?”

“One of many in the city. Bunch of high schools will probably run drunk through the streets with everyone else. No one will get carded because no one cares on New Years. Dancing and whatever. Watch the ball drop, it’s just the feral thing to do that night.”

“And you could score with any girl, but you’re asking me. It won’t be like a date or anything.” Evie dropped the charm in her fingers to see Billy’s eyes linger.

“You mentioned that. I know how to get out and have a good time without fucking. I have all sorts of tricks.” He noted the word didn’t make her wince. “Not looking to break your seal.”

“You’re gross.” Again, no argument on the details of it.

“You’re too tightly wound.” He paused, whispering. “Maybe not, but you hide it.”

"Nothing to hide, I'm an open book."

"A never ending record," Billy pushed into her so their legs pressed flush, "not nervous around me though."

"Nope." Her lips popped, fingers curling into the hem of her dress when his arm snaked behind the couch. "Not nervous."

"Not running either." That realization seemed to hit them both.

"Why would I? I can handle you just fine." She hissed at that because it came out sexual. Billy licked his lips and snickered, shifting to face her head on.

"Oh, I like the sound of that." He'd murmured, inches from her face. Evie found herself wondering how he managed to weasel his way in this close. Wondered why she was drinking him back in. "Picture this. You and this perfume enjoying a couple free drinks and some fireworks in the city. No strings attached. Not a date. Just those exploding lights and that chilly wind cooling your cheeks down, because you'll be blushing and you won't know it."

"Uh huh. I guess I can see it." Evie sized him up and crossed her legs to lean back into him. "You and the roar of a Camaro commanding the city to its knees. Glam and hairspray working their magic."

"I love an audience, Angel." Billy shook his head and froze because her palm came to his knee. Bold move. "But, I don't mind the front seat to see you blush too."

"What about you?" She whispered with a hum. "What makes King Billy blush? Does all the noise you like to make hide it?" A spark flitted up her eyes. Made his chest heave. "Is that your secret?"

"Come to the party, I'll tell you all my secrets." Fingers grazed up her arm when soft digits gave a rhythmic tap against his thigh. Billy went for it. "Do this dance with me."

"You don't play as hard to get as you let on."

"Not when I want something bad. Better to just play *harder*." Lips parted to hit that word. Her brows lifted at such an admittance. "You're sizzling up a fuse, aren't you, Evie?" She shook her head with a lazy smile. Eyes finding his again after. Near sultry.

"You have to light a fuse first, Billy, for it to sizzle." Her hand crept along denim. Felt him go rigid and part his thighs just a little bit wider before she sat back. "And the fire's out anyway. I'll make good on the deal. If you win."

"I hope you have a dress picked." Billy scoffed, breathless and still intent on her while she looked ahead at the screen.

"Time is ticking. As if you taking me out will do me any good." Evie rolled her eyes and reclined back into his side. Quite comfortably like she wasn't thinking about it. "Give me cool points so Tommy and Carol leave me alone."

"They're assholes to everyone. It's not you." Billy replied dismissively. Curled his finger into her locks behind the sofa.

"You don't notice who they target because you're too busy chasing skirts and fighting others yourself. Also haven't seen the writing

about me on the bathroom walls. School hierarchy rules. Open those pretty ocean eyes and see the world for what it is. You're untouched because of your front. Everyone wants to be Billy Hargrove or screw him."

Evie looked at him there, blinking.

"What side of the line are you on?" He bit his lip. "I can guess."

She plucked his hand from her shoulder and placed it back into his lap. Patted it for good measure.

"So, you really think my eyes are pretty?" Billy laughed when a square pillow nailed him in the face. "You said it before too! When we were drunk and you still think it now that we're sober. Telling."

Tension shattered. Evie glittered right back at him, teeth flashing. Still chuckling, he tilted his head back to create the magical sound. Quieted.

"Fine. I'll pay attention if it helps you sleep at night."

Evie blew air out her lips, let a curl fly up and bounce down. They watched the screen again. Shared a space. Maybe it shouldn't have felt so intimate.

"Episode's almost over. Thanks for playing." She about sang. Triumphant.

"I guess you have me, Fenny." Billy pushed up. "Mind if I take a leak?" He was already pacing off so she said nothing.

Just watched couples go hand in hand into the sunset.

There was a flush, the sink running, and then Billy's huge smile crept back down the hallway. The boy was gone all of three minutes.

Bourbon in his arms. Purring. Perfectly happy. Evie's jaw dropped open.

"Guess who crawled out of the shower to eyeball my junk? Not that I blame him." Billy quipped, scratching the cat's chin. Bourbon

rubbed back into the touch. Rasped his scratchy meow for more.

"Traitor..." Evie muttered, coming to her feet. "Damn it."

"Oh, yeah. You're mine now, Evie. Seven o'clock. Wear something short if you like." Billy's lips were pressed up. Such an ass.

"I call foul." Her finger lifted.

"And I'll be calling on you. New Years Eve. Just an annoying dance. It'll be fun and free." His chin gestured at her. "Just say yes, Evie. Get out of this small town and see some lights for once. You want your name in them so bad, you gotta look at the damn things first. No day but today. Right?"

"Right," a lengthy sigh, "but, the fire's still out. Bourbon, why? First, mom and now you. He's just hypnotizing you both." Evie took the cat from Billy, watched his face scrunch.

"Your cat is really named Bourbon?" He said flatter.

"I found him when we visited family in New Orleans. Bourbon street." She let the feline nuzzle into her chest.

"God, Angel, I hope your lyrics are more creative than that." Billy lightened, chest shaking as he peered away shaking his pretty head. "Well?"

She pouted and if that cat wasn't between them, Billy didn't know what he would have done. Another time or place. Another pretty dress. Another shared beat of bleeding together.

That itched him the rest of the night.

"I'll go. Seven. I'll dress nice. It's not a date, so don't try anything and get me home in one piece. I reserve the right to leave you if you act like too much of an ass." Evie grumbled some about it, defeated.

But, she wondered about the lights and what it might be like to share them. Suppressed all urges that longed to hope.

"That much I can do, I might even keep my ass in check. Don't

flake, we have a deal. I'll be your Mr. Darcy or whatever." Billy made for the door, plucking up his jacket as she opened it.

"That's an impossible standard, but keep dreaming." Evie sighed out. Watched him turn to beam. Offered a pet to Bourbon. "Least you got his name right."

"Quick learner, I get points. New Years Eve. Don't make me chase you, Evie, because I will." Billy stepped off the porch lighting a cigarette, idly waved behind him.

Game. Set. Match.

"I'm not gonna be nice about it." She called.

"So, you'll be your normal, cheery self with me. Great. Won't ask for anything else, we have a good thing going." He turned to wink, curling a final smile. Evie stilled, petting her cat before sighing into the cold air. "See you then, Fenny."

"Whatever you say, Hargrove." She shut the door as he climbed his own porch. Looked at her cat.

"You did this to us, I hope you're proud."

Bourbon blinked. Another rumbling purr in response.

** **

"*The world...*" Evie plucked an idle cord. Sang soft to not disturb her mother down the hallway sleeping. Nestled into the wall on her bed next to the window. "*May think I'm foolish. They can't see you like I can...*"

Darkness shrouded save for a small set of twinkling lights around her bed frame. Eyes kept averting to the clock.

"*Oh, but anyone...who...*"

Another pause to see the clock. Eyes flickered out along the street marked with lamps. Cracking her window to see out. Nothing. Evie settled. Changed the tune to something original and plucked another

heart string.

“Those ocean eyes... Drowning me out. What I wouldn't give to...” Her palm caught the vibrating cord to snuff the sound. A groan as she set the guitar aside. “Shit.”

That was not happening.

A car went down the street at the exact moment the clock struck eleven. Evie grabbed her coat and locked her bedroom door. Checked her hair and makeup before hitching one leg over the window. Felt the naughty thrill pulse into her heart as she snuck out.

Billy peered to see beyond his own window near the foot of his bed. Unseen in the pitch black space. Thought about catching her. It was always a Saturday night. Evie Fenny crept out like clockwork. Wearing something nice under a jacket she held close. Sometimes with the guitar on her back. Lips painted red. Went down the street and returned as the sun rose. He'd observed it often. Sometimes it happened on school nights. Two to three times a week. Never asked because it didn't seem important enough before. But, now...

Billy knew a teen girl didn't paint her lips red at eleven o'clock on a Saturday for just anyone.

Evie hurried down the street toward the woods at the end. Got into a shiny car. Disappeared until sunrise.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey hey! I appreciate you! Talk to me about the impending Skirt Safari to come!! Ramble below and I'll ramble back. TY :)))

5. Skirt Safari

Notes for the Chapter:

It's time for the dance. TW: Teenagers can be evil. Also head's up, light will be shined on an unhealthy relationship Evie is navigating. I won't get explicit with it, but we as readers are going to see red flags that our girl cannot see. Or is ignoring.

Evie didn't tell anyone she was going to a dance with Billy Hargrove for New Years. Just said some party in the city. Didn't tell her mother. Not even Heather.

Floated through the holidays with her guitar on the porch swing. Bundled up as snow fell. Little, perfect flurries. Open notebook next to her as she crossed her legs and exhaled into cold. Strumming idle tunes away from her mother's indoor phone chatter.

A car skidded up to Billy's house. Day before the party. Tommy's freckled face popped out of the driver's side with Carol getting up too.

"Hey, Fenny!" Tommy couldn't resist prodding. "You stay on the nice list this year?"

"Don't spend all your coal in one place." She set one leg down. Head cocking. Billy came out of his house shrugging a jacket on. He stopped to gawk at the snow. Let it fall into his curls. Rough and ethereal.

"Let's go." He didn't glance at Evie there as Tommy approached her porch steps. "Gimme the keys, I'm driving still."

"Little birdy told me you were gonna be around on New Years." Tommy leaned against a brick post. A broad smile.

"Oh, you guys are going too? That really makes me want to go." Evie replied flatly. Billy smacked Tommy's chest with a hiss at him.

"I got shit to do. C'mon." He warned, not wanting the annoying boy

to ruin his chances here.

“Don’t worry, Evie, I already have plans that night. I probably won’t be around that joint. I don’t qualify.” Carol’s bracelets clinked together when she swept her styled hair aside, undaunted by Billy’s steel glaring. Tommy chuckled with her and Billy gave a growl low in his throat.

“You take requests on that thing?” Tommy continued. “Got a song for me?”

“Sure. How about this?” Evie straightened up. Strummed and tapped one foot to a beat.

“Don’t stand, don’t stand so... Don’t stand so close to me...” Evie flashed a smile and kept playing. “How’s that?” Tommy hitched to laugh until Carol hit his chest, tugging because she was over this conversation.

Billy paused to smile at Evie there. Looking so pretty in the snow, it was criminal. Evie touched the strings to stop the flow of vibration.

“She isn’t bad.” Tommy stumbled as Carol pulled him away.

“Come on, you don’t even know what that song is about.” She peered back to glower at Evie. Lethal.

“You see? I can’t sit on my own porch without being bothered.” Brown eyes lifted to Billy as she sat back to idly move the swing with one foot.

“Never actually heard you sing.” Billy had observed instead, twisting the ring around his middle finger. No compliment or insult followed him back down the steps. Evie plucked a few cords, watching him go.

Billy wrestled Tommy for the driver’s seat. Won. Skidded off to raise hell somewhere else.

It was a clock ticking down each lazy hour as her secret hung in the air. Heather parents stole their daughter away to the Holloway’s lavish cabin for a family New Years Party which took the heat off the

lie.

Evie spent the whole day preparing in her bedroom. Tossed dress after dress upon her bed like she cared what Billy Hargrove thought. Decided on something short and maroon. Sleeves just above her elbows and a slight poof to the little skirt. Gave her waist a little pull and didn't make her cleavage look half bad. Matched her nails and lip color too.

Makeup spread all over her dresser. Glittery gold shadow with a smoky haze. The dress was a metallic foil maroon, seemed fun enough for New Years. Big hoops and a necklace completed her look. Evie hurried to grasp a jacket before Billy could come to her door.

"I'm going to a New Years thing mom, I'll be safe." She called on the way out.

"Have fun, baby!"

"I will." Evie sprayed amber perfume and was lotioning her hands rushing out of the house. Almost bumped into Billy on the doorstep ready to knock. His eyes narrowed.

"You didn't tell anyone."

"Bet you didn't either. Do your parents know?" She slipped her jacket on. Billy blew smoke in response. He seemed annoyed today which did nothing for her nerves. "So, I put on a dress...don't get me murdered."

The joke seemed to go over him.

"Well, let's go." He turned and went toward his car, stunning in the cold and twice as rude. "Let's just get this shit going." A cigarette hit the pavement.

Evie didn't move.

"Are you alright?" She asked slower.

"I just want to get there." Billy snapped. "C'mon."

"Listen, I really don't have to go anywhere if you're going to be an ass the entire time." She crossed her arms and Billy flared up. "I spent hours getting ready for this stupid thing. This stupid thing that you pestered me to go to!"

His shoulder dropped.

"Hours, huh." Billy came around and opened the door for her. "We can't waste that."

The charm reeled back.

Evie stood unmoved.

"Look, I just got into it with my old man. Wasn't you." Billy explained. "You lost the bet, Angel."

"I did." She sighed and crossed to get in. He shut the door and joined her. Turned the music down when it blared. "What's this bar called?"

"The Dogfight."

"Charming." Evie stuffed a tiny wallet into the bodice of her dress. Billy eyed her chest. "Watch the road, Hargrove."

"You spent hours getting ready for me." He mused, rubbing his chin. "I like when a girl admits it."

"And how long did it take you to get this hair just right?" She reached and tugged at a curl as he'd done with her so many times. He'd doused himself in that sex cologne he liked so much. A red shirt opened and tucked into the tightest jeans he could have picked out. Leather jacket again today. "We both wore maroon."

"Looks more wine on you." He fussed at that.

"Just saying." Evie broke to smile. "I meant it, don't get me murdered."

"We get in, we snag some drinks, we get out. The streets are going to be chaos; it should be fun." Billy turned onto the main roads. Sped

beyond all the other cars.

"I'm not letting you drive drunk."

"A motel is always an option for me, sweet cheeks." Billy clicked his tongue.

"With two beds, ponyboy." She only grinned, undaunted. "I lost a bet, not all my morals."

Billy laughed, picking up speed.

"We can loosen those up tonight."

** ** *

"What do you drink, Angel, an appletini?" Billy dragged Evie into a dark lit bar. Pink and yellow lights shooting all directions. Metallic streamers hanging and swaying with the dancers already smashed on the floor. Evie looked down at his hand as he peered around and brought her all the way to a corner table near the window.

Even settled a menu on the other side like they might be hiding behind it.

"Something with a little pink umbrella?" He continued, eyes on the window. Drunks sang along the streets in their party clothes.

"Try whiskey. I'm going to need one for this." She caught Billy's head whipping around. "Who are you looking for?"

"No one, I-fuck!" The gorgeous boy lost all composure and skidded out of his chair when a bare ass pressed the window. Evie gasped and covered her eyes, pouty lips slack. Kind of enjoyed Billy losing his cool. "Asshole!" Music overlapped the chaos. Tommy fucking H howled with laughter on the other end, pulling his pants up.

"Fuck." Billy sank back into his chair. "Shithead."

Tommy swaggered in still laughing, had a woman on his arm that wasn't Carol.

She was clearly older, wrinkled and fatigued. Maybe forty. Wearing a tight purple lace number that was not keeping her warm or fitting correctly. Jean jacket. Fishnets. Smudged makeup. Big beehive hairstyle. She smelled like sweet pineapple and chain smoked her teeth brown and broken.

Billy and Evie exchanged looks because she was also clearly a lady of the night.

“Tommy...who is your new friend?” Billy asked slower. All teeth.

“Her name’s Bubbles.” Tommy was shorter than her in those heels. Head on her shoulder with the cheesiest grin. “She’s a real winner.”

“Charmed, handsome.” The woman rasped and reached for Billy’s hand then Evie’s. “Like the shadow, sweetie, it suits you.”

“Thank you,” she blushed. “I like your beetle hairpin.”

“We’re going to hit the dance floor,” Tommy scanned Evie, “good to see you here, Fenny.”

“Right.” She glanced at Billy as they left. “What was that about?”

“He’s drunk. Probably sad about some dumb shit with Carol, they’ll be screwing again before school starts.” Billy said that quicker than intended. A light bulb went off in his head. “Drinks. Wait here.”

“Thanks.” Evie recognized teens from her school and rivals.

“Fenny!” A couple football players spotted her inside. Poked until the window tilted open. “What’s a pretty girl doing in this dump?”

“Our girl who brought Tannen down a couple pegs.”

Questionable Hawkins High Fame.

“Just enjoying New Years.” Evie giggled there fiddling with her nails.

“If someone messes with you, let the guys know, we’re down the block. That bar on the corner.” They started off.

"Will do, boys." She jilted when Billy smacked a drink down, sitting. "Thank God."

"He ain't here. Thank me." Billy leaned over to see her. Crossed his arms as she drank. "You don't party this hard?"

"We snuck into a bar, did you even get carded?"

"Told you, no one cares." He gulped his own glass down. "Stop worrying."

Evie just drank more in response.

"You established I only go to lame high school parties." Evie paused to see him. "Kind of waiting for a rain of pig's blood here. I guess I actually want a good night."

"I wouldn't say it's asking a lot." Blue eyes went to the table, paint chipping away from wood. There was an uneasy beat before he softened. "Another? It's open for the party. Free shit even after twelve."

"Please." She followed him this time. Felt the burn in her throat as they leaned there together. "So, why-?"

"Hey, Fenny." Brock Tannen's sculpted face craned over her shoulder. Billy tensed, jaw twitching. "Boy, am I shocked to see you here. With Keg King Billy Hargrove. Apply enough heat and even the ice queen melts. Must be a Cali boy thing."

"You'd be about Antarctica." Evie replied. He only smiled. Eyes shifted to Billy.

"Hope you stick around to midnight, have fun you two." Brock pulled a girl off with him, staring at him like he was a pot of gold at the end of a spring rainbow. Little blonde with some acne scars she tried to cover with make-up. An eyeshadow look in blue to match her dress that must have taken hours to perfect. Two missing teeth in her mouth. Skin and bone thing. Young looking.

"Asshole." They said at the same time. Tension broke. Billy chuckled and she peered in the direction Brock had gone into.

“Did you see that girl with him?”

“No, who?” Billy scratched the back of his neck. Kept looking around.

“Ah, nothing.” Evie brought the glass to her lips again and sipped. Screens all over this bar and the city played the party in New York. Commotion in the streets marked with loud party goers. “So, what’s there to do before midnight hits?”

“Whatever the fucking fuck hell we want.” Billy tapped his glass to hers and downed it. Relished the burn.

“You like to swear.”

“No, I like to drink.” He corrected, offering her a menu. “Eat something.”

“We gotta pay for food.”

“I’m buying, I invited you.” Came a shrug. “Pick some shit out.”

“You want food, honey pie?” A man flocked over.

“Damn right, I do.” Evie peered at Billy. Amused. “I’ll take the fucking chicken tenders with a side of bitching fries.”

“Ketchup?” They were writing, amused because she was cute even still.

“Fuck yes. Um, please.” She gestured to Billy with his jaw slack open. “And who knows what this asshole wants.”

“Blondie?”

“Ah...I’ll just have another drink. Fucking beer.” He batted his lashes.

“Wonderful.” The man slid off snickering.

“What was that, Fenny?”

“I swear, but not like you. It sounded like fun to try it out.” She

covered her lips to giggle. "Why didn't you get food? We're drinking and it's going to be a long night."

"Long night, you say? So, you want to stick around for the whole party."

"I put on a dress and makeup. People are going to see me and the effort I made." She set her jaw on her chin. "Avoided the question."

"I only had enough cash for one meal. Rest is if we need the motel."

"Billy, you should have said something! I have a few bucks on me somewhere." Evie frowned when he got his beer.

"Doesn't matter, you're probably a lightweight. Get food in your stomach before you down more free whiskey." He brushed it off quickly, blue eyes on the windows. Evie's food came and she slid it between them.

"It's hot, have some. Don't make me feed you, I won't be my mother.." She pressed and pouted until Billy snagged a piece of chicken. They shared the basket, licking warm fingers clean. Billy took the thumb he licked and fixed her lipstick, earning a snort of protest.

"Ick." She cocked her head away, amused. "Thanks, *mom*."

"You know, it took me ages to place that tiny accent you got. But, it's so Louisiana. Mona rubbed off on you." Billy pointed when Evie had gotten a new drink.

"It's not."

"Let's get air, I think some idiot is setting off fireworks in the street." They got up to get away from the crowds. Evie noticed the odd couples. Scanned before Billy was pulling at her wrist through the mess of dancing bodies. Cool air chilled her pink cheeks as they got down the block to pause. Billy sighed and set one foot on the brick behind him to light up.

"Don't have an accent," Evie picked up again, "that's all mom."

“Born and bred in Louisiana, it’s sticking to you too.” Billy offered the smoke.

“Not good for the singing voice.” She declined so he puffed again. Groups were already tossing balloons and confetti about. Bar hopping from club to club. Evie pulled her coat closer. “I don’t have an accent. You have one, west coast.”

Billy watched her look up at the few stars that decided to come out over the city.

“I haven’t been to California. Been to Vegas a couple times. All the women in my family descend upon that city every few years and I always had to tag along. Not much for me to do but look at the lights.”

“My dad says Vegas is full of swindlers and whores.”

“He strikes me to think that about most places.” She chuckled and Billy agreed, stepping on the butt of his cigarette. “This your first time out here?”

“Yeah.” He sucked in some air, tongue sweeping his lip.

“Hargrove’s never been to New Orleans. I bet you’d like the food, it’s unreal.”

“You haven’t had the food in Cali.” Billy quipped, scooting in next to her to see the sky that had her so enamored. “Never really have to deal with the fucking cold.”

“I always wondered how you stayed warm in those clothes.” Evie’s giggle cut the second he pressed into her.

“I just tuck in next to a warm girl, Fenny, it isn’t rocket science.” A breath touched the air and Evie felt herself spark. Saw those same stars glittering brighter within Billy’s eyes. A distant shore calling them both home.

Evie felt those flower petals whirling around her stomach like butterfly wings. Burrowing deep to bloom with new life inside her. Vibrant colors she hid from the world spinning to unfurl. Billy looked

into her soul and saw the colors dance neon. Wind picked up their curls with gentle caresses. A pull of vines and thorns bubbled up too. Twisted every way to protect Evie in the only way they knew how.

She could feel Billy's chest heaving with air. Hard and flush into her skin, stealing warmth. Admiring the echo of lights behind her brown eyes. If she opened her mouth, a rose might blossom on her tongue. Billy wondered about tasting it for himself. He dared to inch in and she spun out.

"It's a nice night. Beautiful."

"Let's get a beer to go take a hike from this place. We'll make it back before the ball drops." Billy figured he could just keep her from the main party and she wouldn't notice the odd couplings within. They delved in and out of bars. Watched the mayhem in the streets. Even caught a totally illegal race or two. Sparklers on every corner underscored by laughter and jeers.

"What's next for you, after school?"

"Save money to hightail it out of here. See the beach again and get a shitty job." Billy gulped, licking his lips after. "You going to college?"

"Probably just the local community college, more focused on my songs. My mom and I keep trying to put it out there. Something's holding me back." Evie saw him peer at her to continue as they clicked along the cool sidewalks. Decorations scattered all over the buildings and streets. "What if these big time producers don't like them? My songs. I mean, what if they tell me I'm no good?" She paced ahead to ramble. "I just don't think I can take that kind of rejection."

"So, you find some asshole who wants to put you on the radio." Billy chuckled. "You had entire albums on your walls. You want it bad, chica."

"What about you?" Evie gestured with the bottle. "What secret hobbies and talents does Billy Hargrove hide away?"

"I care about my car and that's about as deep as I go, Angel." He winked, tossing his empty into the trash so she finished her own and followed. Swallowed the froth down. Evie hurried to nudge into him.

"C'mon. You're a good enough student. I see the grades you get in our classes."

"All to keep my old man off my shit. Not like that works." Billy stopped at a crosswalk, settled his hand on the bar so Evie slipped under it to lean there and make him look at her. He couldn't help the smirk at this playful side.

"Who will I tell?"

"Heather, most likely." Came the quick reply.

"I don't tell her everything," Evie trailed off with her eyes wandering, a sly smile pressed, "I sing, sew, play the guitar, and collect little trinkets. Buttons. Rocks and crystals. Old coins and keys. Little vintage ceramic and porcelain figures. And I needle felt."

"What's that?"

"You stab wool with a special needle until it makes a pretty shape. You probably caught a few things in my room. On the bookcase."

"You're a hoarder."

"I'm very organized." Evie giggled as they crossed the street. In their own little bubble, ignoring all the festivities around them.

"What can't you do?"

"I can bake alright, but it's messy. Not a great cook. I'm hopeless, my mother gave up trying with me. I also can't get my leg behind my head. But, I'm close." Her joke brought a full laugh out of him. Angelic sort of sound. "I'm serious."

"You'll have to demonstrate, I don't believe it." Billy stood in front of her, walking still and chuckling as he went.

"Fat chance." Her heels picked up to get beside him. They passed a

window full of TVs and stopped to see all the parties playing within each screen. “You ever think the world is too big? We don't have enough time to experience all of it, I mean.”

Billy only puffed.

“So, what can you do?” Evie pressed again.

“I can cook alright. I don't know, I just do good in school because the shit's never been hard on me. Used to surf,” he glanced at her, “back in Cali.”

“I'm not a strong swimmer.” Evie said, looking up at him and the lights playing on his stunning face. Followed the curve of his jaw down his neck. “You know, Heather lifeguards at the pool every summer. She'd help you get a gig if you need a job when school is out. Probably prefer you over the other jerks that apply.”

“Not as bad as the other jerks, I like that.” Billy mused, eyes flicking all around. Caught in stars again. “Hey, there's the LA bash. Miss that shit. Music scene raged pretty hard.” The way he smiled melted Evie all the way to the pavement. Billy standing there lax and missing home. Displaying his own lush colors. Dreaming and feral.

“You're always writing in class when you're not drawing dicks in textbooks.” Evie observed, earning an amused look in response. “Do you like that stuff? Stories?”

“My mom used to say I told better stories than she did. I'd tell her them to help her sleep.” Billy admitted, blinking a couple times before the illusion shattered and he went stony again. Paced around Evie to continue.

“You could write books, get more into English. Make some money being an author. Sell stories to the big screen.”

“Burn out and go broke, sure.” Billy lit up another cigarette, gave this entertained puff. His wall went up higher and Evie stayed too soft. “End up teaching some snots like that jerk, Bowers.”

“He's not a jerk.”

“Not to the girls in class.” Billy flicked his ashes. “Probably likes you and Carol fighting for his attention.”

“We don’t...” Evie went red as an apple. “I don’t. Carol’s just jealous of the attention he gives me.”

“Still weird. She hates that you’re a teacher’s pet. Don’t know why you’d want to be.” Smoke edged from his lips.

“It’s nice when someone is respectful once in a while to a girl like me. When they listen, you know?” Evie held herself as they walked along a bit slower. “He respects me and what I have to say.”

“Shouldn’t trust someone just because they’re being nice to you, Evie.” Billy had this distant expression when he said that. Full of ocean waves rolling into a peaceful shore.

“Nice is still better than...” She never finished and Billy didn’t ask her to.

They peered at all the buildings illuminated before them. The skyscrapers pointing straight to heaven. Music boomed from several clubs, mingling all the celebrations together.

“Want to head back? Get another hard drink.”

“I’d like that.” She admitted, shuffling some.

“Move it, Fenny, free alcohol doesn’t happen every day for us.” Billy snatched her by the hand, picked up the pace until they were both laughing and out of breath. Reeling around drunk groups of friends to squeeze back up to the bar.

The hard notes of Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear us Apart” began after the second round. Evie was swaying already as they stood at the corner of the bar counter.

“Do you dance, Angel?” Billy cocked his head.

“Sometimes. If I’m supposed to be onstage one day, I have to.” She giggled, bubbling and pink like champagne. “You?”

“Fuck, no. Just bounce around and smash into people at concerts.”

“That counts!” Her voice picked up over the ruckus. People dressed in glitter and metallic moved together above a floor that lit up. Gave the place an opulent vibe.

“You look like you want to get out there!” Billy leaned toward her. The third round came.

“We don’t have to!” Evie was pressed all the way into him. Both shouting at each other out of necessity. A pulse pounded their flesh apart. Jackets were left on a chair next to Tommy and his date.

Billy sank his drink in one go so Evie followed.

“I asked you here, I’ll ask you to dance if I want!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!” Billy echoed, sweeping Evie by the waist out with him. Bodies swayed all directions. Smashed them even closer together. Curls bounced.

Evie got swept up in the lights dancing on her skin. Blue and red glows now. She let her head tip back and moved with Billy there. He watched her intently, felt the whole world slow. Smiled brighter than he should have. Hot and sparking.

Electric and dreamy. Fizzling neon in their hungry veins. Bodies heating and sweaty. Nothing mattered in these lights though, something freeing there.

Didn’t even care that it was fucking Cyndi Lauper blasting.

“*Girls just wanna have fun!*” Evie sang along. She came alive under these glimmers in the crowds. Like she was the only one there. Every song change, they binged to each beat and never seemed to tire of it.

And then the mood tipped. Tempered with that damn Foreigner song about love. Billy and Evie stilled with it. Looked out at the couples coming together for a slow dance.

“Uh,” Evie swallowed harder and tucked some unruly curls behind her ear, “did you want to...?”

“We’re doing this fucking party right. You asked for two things. A good night and no murder, I can manage that much.” Billy stole her forward. He tried to blame the alcohol.

Dipped a palm around the small of her back to bring her into his chest. Inches shorter, her eyes popped open. Lips parted with no words in sight. The alcohol in their bellies caught fire. He grabbed her hand and she laced their fingers without a thought about it. It was bold, how he touched her and Evie wasn't used to that.

“There ya go. Just sway some.”

Evie pressed her lips and broke that eye contact because it was turning her back to mush. Stared at the saint chain around Billy's neck. There was a pleasant glisten upon his taut chest from sweat. She got drunk off his stupid cologne. Let him inhale her perfume in turn. Boiling amber gleaming to stunt all his senses. Hint of sweet vanilla lotion.

Unabashed, Billy pressed into her body. Not thinking she took up too much space or she wasn't desirable. No, Evie Fenny was perfectly covetable. With her batting lashes and lights highlighting a glow upon her high cheeks. They swayed together between couples so Evie brought her arm over his shoulder. Gathered the bravery to see his eyes again, already looking at her face.

“Billy,” Evie curled her fingers into his shirt, “why am I here?”

“Because I asked you.” Billy spun her around under all the stars and streamers.

“Why'd you ask me?” She searched him. Saw his eyes flicker beyond her a couple times.

“Because I wanted to, Evie.”

“Why'd you want to?” Her tone etched into him, gentle as she could with another change of songs. Something older from the 70s by Kate Irving. Her little voice filling the space around them.

Billy just kept spinning Evie there at the center of the floor and they looked at each other without even getting dizzy. Let the world tilt while they stayed static. Silence crept and it was stunning.

I'm afraid 'cause it feels too good

And I want it too bad

“Because you called me pretty.” Billy winked that time. Devilish. “At that party on Loch Nora.”

“When we yelled at each other?” Evie felt the tension break and spill out. “I said your eyes were pretty.”

“Same thing.”

I never dreamed someone like you

Could want someone like me

Her head came to his collar when she laughed that time. The heart under his skin picked up.

“Evie.” Billy pressed then so she came up. The syllables died on his tongue. “We’re here and I like it. So, it doesn’t fucking matter.”

“No, I guess not.” She let herself smile into his skin when her head dropped again. A slight giggle. “I like it too.”

“Good.” Billy hit that word hard. They spun and spun to the flow of sound and lights. Drank it all in. Until it was seconds to midnight. Couples were stilling to count.

Billy looked at Brock raising his drink across the way.

Twenty seconds.

He peered down at Evie when her eyes lifted to see him.

Just one kiss, he could have stolen it.

And he couldn’t do it.

Their hands dropped away. Evie smiled at the scene. Everyone celebrating the birth of this new year. It felt magical. Too good to let flutter away.

Billy just looked at her and Evie breathed.

It happened too fast.

Soft hands on his jaw while she came to her toes and gave him one peck upon his lips. So inordinate in sweetness that Billy felt his eyes water.

Instantly she slipped back down. Still beaming brighter than any star this night.

A thank you for every single smile he'd painted upon her face in these short hours. For his boldness and his touch without fear.

A kiss where there were no thorns for the first time in all her life.

Billy had never been given such a kiss. It was gift wrapped. Something so signature for him from this girl. This girl he decided he liked to be around. He gasped the moment she let him go. Caught Brock laughing all the way across the room.

"No." He said. Crushed somehow.

"No?" Evie's head cocked in confusion.

"Happy New Year!" Echoes and fireworks blasted. Everyone jumping up and down while Billy and Evie remained still as marble. Locked into each other.

"Ah, I mean..." With midnight gone, Billy pulled her in. Decided to make this one count.

Palms cupped Evie's face. Brought her back with the slightest gasp he drank down. Kissed her full on the mouth like he'd been thinking about it all night. Billows of shiny confetti fell over them. Stuck to hair and clothing. Caught on flushed cheeks. Even tickled the kiss and made them laugh into it. Evie held his wrists, tried to remain steady until she had to part and angle to go back in.

“Why?” She hitched the hot word against him.

“Because I want to.” Billy uttered, mouth open just a little to coax her back in.

This candied confetti kiss she’d remember forever. And the beautiful boy who opened his heart just enough to share it with her. Evie shined at him when she drew out enough to see his eyes. Billy’s thumbs drew shapes into her cheeks.

A finger had to playfully swipe a bit of caught confetti from her bottom lip so he could taste her again. Utterly divine.

Evie’s arms slipped around his neck. Pulled.

“Let’s get out of here,” Billy spoke between kisses. “Yeah? Let’s just go somewhere.”

Her lashes fluttered at him. Same sensation drew up her stomach before she was nodding.

“Okay.” Nerves crept. Billy smacked their lips together one last time. Like he wanted her and only her for the rest of this night. “I have to, um...restroom.”

“I’ll grab our coats.” Billy’s hands brought hers down. Held them. He seemed in a hurry. “Meet me at the door. We’ll go.”

Evie floated off into the wave of bodies so Billy sped to Tommy’s table. Bubbles must have excused herself too.

“Man, you tongued, Fenny. It was actually kinda hot.” Tommy raised his hand for a high five that was ignored. “I won the pot, you know.”

“You paid that girl.” Billy snatched their coats up.

“Yeah, no one has to know that. Don’t get me disqualified.” Tommy leaned over. A hand clapped Billy on the back.

“I’m so impressed. She kissed you, man. Whatever you did, I want that power.” Brock laughed loudly. “She was all over you, and that

bit after midnight. Poor girl. Thinking anyone would ever-

"Man, just shut up." Billy shoved to pass him. "Let's just forget this shit ever happened."

"Oh, no, B. I don't think we will. You probably just want your reward. You earned it." The horrible boy made it a point to count each bill carefully until he pressed it at Billy's chest. "Good work. Maybe you can get a blowy out of her before you drop her off at home. My date's good for one too before I call her a taxi."

Billy shoved the money into his pocket. Felt like trash. Eyes anywhere else.

"Whatever, man."

** ** *

At the same time, Evie stumbled to the sink and washed her hands. Cloud nine. Sang to herself out of habit.

"Oh, but anyone...who knows what love is..." She looked at that reflection. This breathless, kiss smothered girl who was grinning. Happy. Dabbed under her eyes to fix the makeup with a cold paper towel. *"...would understand."*

"Pretty pipes you got there, sweetie pie." The scratching voice called before a stall opened. Tommy's date. "Nice night, huh?"

"The best." Evie was still dancing in a dream, showered in confetti.

"Wasn't as bad as I thought. Free meal. Pretty guy who treats you right for a night. Not a bad gig. Not at all." The lady came to the mirror. Washed her hands and started to apply some extra make up. "Stupid name though. Skirt Safari."

"What?" Evie's head cocked. Hip leaning into the sink.

"Oh, baby. You should open those big eyes." The woman puckered up and put a lipstick into her tiny clutch. "Tommy told me everything. Tradition. These boys bring a date. The ugliest girl gets them the win and they get some money. Stupid high school thing."

And I won. Tommy said I'd get a bonus for that."

"They..." Evie felt her entire heart sink. The vines and their thorns wrapped tighter around her heart until it bled. Like it never wanted to be touched again. "Wait, Billy...he...we-" No breath came into her lungs, it was all punched out. Ruthless and swift.

"The world is unkind to us, sweets." Bubbles sighed at her reflection. "We have to find that kindness where we can. While we can. Just enjoy it because you never know what the next day will bring. Husbands who like to hit. Women who walk out on their babies."

"It's not fair." Evie tremored there. Unable to move so Bubbles gave her cheek a pat.

"I know. But, we don't let them see they've beaten us down. Do we?" Bubbles smiled at her without fear in her heart. And it was tragic because no one cared about her strength, all they saw was how she looked. "My ma always said to be brave and kind. Not everyone's parents give that advice. But, they should. Be a better world."

"My mom says that also." Evie's fists closed. Passionate tears sprang to be blinked away. "I really hope the world is kind to you tomorrow too."

The woman paused. Gave this fluttered smile when her eyes watered. Evie was marching away from her. Shoving through the crowds where Billy stood with Brock and Tommy.

Billy saw her expression and she caught fire.

"Skirt Safari, huh," Evie shoved him into the bar, ripped her coat from his arms. Billy just gave this opened mouth look of horror. She laughed cruelly and Brock joined her, tugging some of his friends to see. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"It wasn't like that." Billy pushed up.

"No, Evie, he's right. Your boy didn't take you because you're ugly." Brock was still chortling, holding his stomach. "Three hundred bucks to get him to take the Hawkins Ice Queen. And you were so

easy, girl. We all took notes.”

“Shut up!” Billy had snapped.

“You didn’t disappoint, he was supposed to kiss you before midnight. But, you earned him the win all on your own!” They clapped and laughed at her there. Evie shook and growled. Shoulders raised. Cackling hyenas.

“Three hundred, wow.” Calming, brown eyes snapped to Billy. “You should have held out. Tannen hates me so much, I bet you could have gotten five. Maybe seven.”

“She’s right, man!”

“Evie, it-”

“You’re all disgusting!” She swept her hand out. Came to Billy’s face. Her tone thickened, but she didn’t cry. Not one drop for any of them. Vibrating so hard with fury that her hand came up. Billy saw it. Waited. Didn’t flinch the way he did at home. Figured he deserved this one.

Silence drowned the boys behind her.

“I want to hit you,” she let her lip wobble, “you know why I’m not. You *know*.”

“Evie.” Billy had nothing. Nothing to give her. Nothing to make her stop shaking.

“You’re all horrible. Disgusting, pieces of shit. Bet Tannen gave you an earful about me. Fuck you both.” Evie leaned out, looked around. “You know, I don’t care why I’m here. What’s awful is every stunning woman you animals brought here will always deserve more than the world can ever give them. You’re the fucking beasts.”

She tore away to go outside. Marched through all the jubilation. Steaming.

“Evie!” Billy was running after her. Yanking at her wrist after she got her coat on.

“Don’t touch me!” A shriek had him skidding backwards.

“Let me fucking explain this.”

“Nothing to explain. Brock paid you to thaw the ice queen. Jokes on you! I’m not even a virgin! I’m not a prize, I’m not anything to you.” She shoved him again because he kept grabbing at her. Trying to slow her down.

“Let me drive you home.” Billy insisted. “Let me get you home safe. I won’t even talk. Hate me forever. Evie, wait, damn it!”

“Leave me alone!” Her scream sparked some attention. She got colder. Sneered at his eyes. “You’re not worth it, Billy.”

Something about that struck an arrow to his heart.

"You talked all this shit about fire's starting and getting out and I..." She hitched to get lower. "I *trusted* you. I believed it, you made me believe it...you're disgusting." A scream perched in her throat, but never left.

"Just let me-"

"No! I don't have to listen to any of this, so just leave me alone!" Evie kept pushing back at him.

“Hey, hey, back off the lady!” Those football players from Hawkins were descending. Grasping Billy by the arms. “Hargrove bothering you?”

“Yes!” Evie shot out, eyes on Billy’s face. “He’s bothering me!”

“Let go of me!” Billy struggled so Evie began to run. As far and as fast as she could until she couldn’t hear him anymore. Fireworks banged over their heads. Exploding to rain down.

Her chest seized so she went to the first payphone she saw. Dialed a number she shouldn’t have.

“Mmm, yes? Who is this?”

“I know you said not to call, I need you. Can you pick me up?” Evie shut her eyes so tight. One tear fell. “Please.”

A sigh.

“Evie? What happened? Where are you?”

Evie finished the call. Went into an alley so Billy wouldn't find her. Waited there in the cold. Tried to hide from the pretty explosions in the sky.

They rang too loud upon her ears. Started to sound like thunder. Evie shut her eyes. Began to rock. Felt out of her skin and trapped in it at the same time. No control. Nothing. Just an ache while the vines crushed her heart. Hands covered her ears.

A lighter palm touched her shoulder.

“Evie.”

“Fredrick.” She reeled up. Tossed herself into his arms. Sobbed so hard and betrayed herself.

“Hey, hey. I got you.”

“Can we go? Can we go home?” She wept, ruining his shirt with makeup and glitter. “Can you take me to your place? I didn't...I didn't tell my mom where I was. I don't want her to know. I don't want anyone to know.”

Bowers was already buckling her into the car. Evie curled up under his coat when he offered it. The air conditioning calmed her some until she was biting her fist to stop the flow. Blood welled under teeth.

“What happened?”

Evie sniffled.

“They...They all laughed at me.”

** **

Curls ruffled out on a towel that smelled of pine an hour later. Feet padded out of the bathroom. Evie in a soft grey robe. Cloth dragged upon the floor until she saw Fredrick in bed. Seated up with little reading glasses to mark some papers down. Handsome.

"You really won't tell me what all happened?" He mused.

"Just some stupid boys." Evie played with the tie at her waist. "You told me to go out with a stupid boy my age. Remember? At the end of summer. After everything I let you do to me. Did...Did you get bored of me? Was that it?"

"No, Evie. You don't understand."

"You told me we had to stop, why did we start?"

"I remember." He sighed, settling his work aside. "It was for the best. I thought. You're all I think about, did you know that? I want to be with you, but there are rules in place. They don't believe what we have can overcome."

Wearing nothing but some boxers and a clean, white tee. His feet touched the floor before he rubbed his head.

"You still look so good in my robe." He sounded bashful when he said that. Eyes drinking her in and averting. "You're all sin, Evangeline."

She shuffled. Shy. Uneasy. Ignoring it.

"Used to say that a lot." Evie pressed her lips up.

"And I mean it every time."

"I meant what I said...before summer ended. You remember that too?"

"You know I do, Evie." Fredrick rubbed his eyes. Swept his hair between those soft fingers. Evie crossed to him.

"We were together the year. You weren't my first, but you were the first man I ever loved. We spent all of that summer together and you

told me we had to stop. Out of the blue. You talked of us running away from this place and getting married and it hurt me.”

“I’m your teacher. If people found out about us... They’d never understand.”

“You waited a year to stop us. Why kiss me if you knew we’d end? I didn’t tell anyone. Not even my best friend.” Evie reached out. Touched his shoulder. “You miss me and I miss you.”

“I’m weak for you, Evie. You know that.” Fredrick let her climb into his lap. “You’re so different and special. Not like other girls. You heard me. You listen to me.”

“I want to be with you. And I said I loved you, but you...”

"What if I said I loved you? Huh? Those boys don't matter, a girl like you needs someone mature to match." He pecked her cheek. "I do love you."

Evie's resolve melted. He shut out the red lights. Burned her thorn covered vines. Words held power because we gave the syllables a charge.

And all Evie Fenny could put out into the world was lightning.

"You do?"

He smiled. Her prince. Braving so much to be with her. Wasn't that magical?

"How many boys have seen you like this?" Fredrick asked in a peculiar way. Charged.

Evie bit her lip. Couldn't look anymore. Didn't answer the question.

"I was scared of us." He soothed now. "I should never have let you go. I'm always going to want the best for you, Evangeline. I hope you believe that. I'll take care of you now, but you have to let me."

Evie leaned in. Kissed him lightly. Wondered how Billy would have touched her in that motel room if they made it. How he'd feel in

return.

"Will you let me?" Fredrick pressed. Wanting all the control she clawed to keep for herself in this skin and marrow. Devouring her without shame or remorse because he was older and knew best.

But, nice was better.

Evie had nothing. Head full of static. Body pulsing against her will. She wanted to scream. She wanted to eat more flower petals. A man loved her and she felt ugly and blaring. Out of control. No longer held to this world. Is that how it should feel?

"Okay."

His chest heaved like the sun might have just come out.

"Can we go to bed now?" She pecked his cheek. Felt his hands going under the robe to open it.

Wordlessly, Fredrick Bowers reached and turned the lamp off. The blaring in Evie's head never ended that night.

Darkness loomed to snuff out every star.

Notes for the Chapter:

Next up, we learn how the rest of Billy's night went. It's been an odd week. Thanks for reading :) Chat with me below!

6. Hard Candy

Notes for the Chapter:

Aftermath of the dance! We learned about the rest of Billy's night. Both babies struggling before school starts up again. TW: Pica and self loathing. Mentions of guys pursuing underage girls.

"Anyone up?"

"No, everyone is hungover." Evie looked around. Everything frosted this morning like a peaceful snow globe. Eternal winter. Gorgeous and destructive. She didn't kiss Fredrick goodbye. "Thank you."

"We'll talk again when school starts up. Don't call, it's too risky."

"But-"

"I'm just...risking everything to be with you, do you know that?"

He snatched her wrist when he said that. Pressed down on the pulse there. It sped.

"Yes...I'll be careful. Do you still love me this morning?" Unsure of what answer would scare her more.

He smiled, grip loosening.

"Yes."

That sufficed. Evie slid out in her dress from yesterday. Watched some dead leaves whirl through the forest before she got onto the sidewalk. Cherry Lane awaited. Bowers turned his car on to slip away unnoticed so she could walk to her house. Mona's car was gone which meant errands.

And whoever her mother brought home to celebrate the New Year with hadn't stayed.

Evie had the displeasure of running into a few at breakfast. These

men who never lasted. Who froze like a deer in headlights to offer sheepish smiles as if she was stupid about why they were there. Who thought they'd be back. *Ha ha*. Thankfully, Mona mostly slept with guys not from Hawkins.

Billy's Camaro was nowhere in sight either. Evie went into her house. Greeted Bourbon and crossed to the bedroom. The mess there replayed all of last night again. Dresses strewn all over her bed. Makeup spread on the vanity.

Evidence of a girl excited to have a great night. With a striking boy. Where she felt beautiful. She pictured herself holding dresses against her body at the mirror. Spinning. Happy.

Wishes.

Evie sucked in some air. Tied her hair back. Hung each dress up again. Pulled her own garment off and tossed it in the trash.

"Maroon is stupid." She mused in her bra and underwear. "You should have worn blue." Sighing to sit at the vanity, fingers rubbed her eyes pink. She organized makeup. Tried and failed to avoid the reflection in the mirror.

Her mother wouldn't want to hear of this. So, Evie tried to look on the bright side. Pressed her palms flat. Looked at the mirror.

"I danced with a boy. A pretty boy and he made me feel..."

Isn't it funny? Pretty funny. The words caught. Piled up and went back down her throat. Perched like they could become a scream but never returned with a vengeance.

She looked at her skin. Excess flesh. It didn't always bother her. Evie knew what she looked like and how the world preferred to see her.

A fist banged into her collar. Growling, she beat at herself. Unable to stop. Weak little bashes against herself.

"Why?" She clenched. "Why do you look like this!"

Fists rubbed her eyes again raw so no tears could flow. Nothingness. Just her soul spinning out of control all sweet and silent. She always did the world and her mother that courtesy. No use crying over spilled milk, just appreciate what you have. Depression and anger, those were ungrateful little phases and pushing them aside was ingrained into her synapses.

Mona made it look so easy.

Evie knocked into the side table, sending her needle felting project to the floor.

“Fuck.” Snatching items up, a sharp edge plucked her finger.

Blood beaded against the skin. A single prick like Sleeping Beauty. Evie calmed at the grim sight. Brought the finger to her lips. Sucked.

Slowly picked up everything else and saw a shiny button there. The same color as her dress from last night. Two fingers held it up so light could stream into the holes. Tiny heavens opening.

Her mouth watered. She no longer heard the laughter. Fredrick’s heavy breathing in her ear. Her mother chided her to smile through pain. Take bitter life pills with a spoonful of sugar. More noise fluttered away. Thunder while she hid in a dark closet. A hand on her leg.

Evie ran the big, acrylic button across her lip. Clicked it on her teeth and liked the sounds. Wind chimes in the fall glimmering.

Hard candy.

It slipped along her tongue. Shifted around saliva. Evie tipped her head back. Eased it down her throat as if it were another bitter pill.

Why do this? Just to see if she could. To see what would happen. To silence all the chaos she choked down.

Dead silence when it was done. Evie sat there tracing her lips with curious fingers. Pictured the pretty button decorating her insides. She could make art inside herself. Snapping her heart back together.

The exact sensations drained.

Tired and sore, Evie crawled under her bed covers. Decided to sleep and dream as deep as she could.

** ** *

Billy's night before wasn't much better.

"What the fuck?" He had blazed back into that shitty bar. Found Brock laughing around his friends and grasped his shirt. "You-

"Billy, I think you want to let me go, my dad has too much influence. He's friends with your mayor, you know." Brock had his hands up to wave his boys off. Billy growled low at him, inches away.

"You think I give a shit that you're rich?"

"I'm just saying I can make shit difficult on your family. I'm sure your daddy won't like that, I hear you guys make a lot of noise on Cherry Lane. Could make Fenny's life harder too, if you care."

Billy's grip loosened and Brock smiled. Tommy saw Billy's eyes change and hadn't even chuckled when the boy returned.

"Aw, Hargrove's gotta little crush. That's cute." More laughter.

That did it.

A fist smashed into his cheek.

Brock was sent flying back out of his chair at the same time Billy raced out. Didn't care to watch and enjoy the sight of that boy nearly doing a back flip.

Money tore from his pocket and shoved into Bubble's hand.

"Take this." Billy didn't count how much he'd given her. Picking up the pace before Brock and his goons could pursue him.

"Billy!" Tommy had called after him, but the boy was out into the cold and headed toward his car.

Evie was long gone. He still scanned the city in his Camaro trying to spot those brown curls and that maroon dress. Felt like an hour passed. She looked empty when she'd left.

Billy almost wished she'd cried or hit him. Something. Anything.

"Shit." He pulled up to a little blonde waiting in the chill. Holding an oversized jacket close and craning to see down the street. "Hey, weren't you Brock's date?" Her face was pinched in discomfort. Shifting steps before she gave a nod. Seemed smaller there alone as drunks rushed about in celebration. "What are you doing?"

"Mm...waiting for the taxi." She had a paper towel pinched between her fingers, trying to get a wet stain out of her dress collar. Billy's gut twisted because he knew what it was.

"Get in, I'll drive you home." Billy sat back and waited. Reluctantly, she crossed over to join him. Face splotchy like she might have teared up earlier. Pulling pins out of her hairstyle. Billy figured Brock must have ruined it getting his *blowy*.

"Thank you."

He revved to go in response after getting the address. Stony and intent on the road for once.

"It's this one." Was all she said once they'd gotten close to her building. Run down and dilapidated. Reminded Billy of the shitty apartment complex he'd lived in with his dad after mom walked out.

"How old are you?" Billy turned to see her and she cringed.

"I'm...fourteen."

Fourteen. Barely a year older than Max.

And he'd only been fourteen when...

Nausea swept up his throat. Billy hitched to breathe and dug into his pocket for whatever was left of the cash Brock gave him. Felt like a true piece of shit.

“That guy, don’t go near him again. He asks you to come out or do things for him. Like sexual things... Don’t do it. Just stay away from him. Got it?” Billy reached out and dropped the wad of crumpled cash into her palms. “And don’t get into anymore cars with older boys. They’re gonna hurt you.”

“You’re not gonna hurt me.”

“No, kid, I’m not gonna hurt you.” Billy gestured. “Go inside, it’s cold.”

She listened, getting out to disappear into the building. Billy rubbed his eyes because they watered. Music turned up to drown the world out before he skidded off. Made it back into Hawkins and parked at Lover’s Lake.

Decided sleeping in his Camaro was the better idea than going home. Not wanting to face Evie’s bedroom window or her old, scrutinizing cat. She wanted nothing to do with him.

Reclined in the back seat, Billy touched his lips and fell into an uneasy rest.

Woke with his head pounding and birds calling out. A truly grey day. He huffed to get out, pissed near a tree, and made it home to park in the driveway next to Neil’s car. Hadn’t left for work yet.

A groan as Billy climbed the steps to go in, felt like he might vomit at the scent of a warm breakfast. Susan playing housewife. Setting plates at the table between Neil and Max.

“Billy, are you hungry?” She caught him. Billy eyed his father reading the paper.

“No.”

“Come, sit down. Eat the nice breakfast Susan made.” Neil’s snap had Billy turning to plop down. He looked like hammered shit. Susan settled a plate of fluffy eggs and bacon down in front of him. Max was staring so Billy shot her a look to stop. “What do you say?”

“Thank you, Susan.” Billy rasped, picking up a fork.

“What’d you do last night?” Neil asked without looking up from his paper.

“Just some party.” A shrug followed. Susan had sat down with her own plate when the doorbell rang.

“Answer that.” Neil pointed her off so she left her plate to get cold and went into the next room. Billy wondered if Susan's ever eaten a warm meal after getting with his dad.

“Susan!” Mona’s chirpy voice piped up.

Billy dropped a bit of eggs in his lap. Had Evie told her?

“I’m so sorry to bug you early. Can I trouble you for a cup of flour? My poor Evie’s taken ill, I wanted to make her something nice for breakfast. Forgot to pick some up, I didn’t know we ran out. For pancakes. I’ll owe ya.”

Billy’s eyes were darting all over the table.

“No problem, come in.” Susan came back in with a measuring cup. “Sorry to hear about Evie.”

“Just an upset stomach, a couple of my fluffiest pancakes should do the trick.” Mona had followed. “Morning all. Happy New Year. I hope Hawkins made good on the festivities.”

Billy couldn’t look at her. Just shifted scrambled eggs around aimlessly.

Neil peered at Mona’s tight clad legs in her little shift dress. Already looking her best this morning after running quick daylight errands.

“Now, Max, I’d love to see you at my salon with your mama.” Mona clasped her hands and Max snickered because she hinted at that every time she saw the younger girl.

“We’ll be sure to visit before school starts up again. Won’t we, Max?” Susan filled the cup.

“Be sure to bring, Billy, I love doing boy’s hair too.”

“You might convince him to cut this all off.” Neil remarked plainly when Billy’s tired eyes lifted. Mona just smiled.

“The boys love to look like rock stars these days, sir. It’s the *in* thing.” She took the flour. “I’ll leave you to your meal. Say, how about I make you your first dinner of the new year? I know it’s been such a change.”

Susan opened her mouth and shut it, peered at Neil for his answer.

“That’s a wonderful offer,” he replied, “only if we can bring the dessert.”

There he was. The charming family man.

Mona gave a cute giggle.

“I’ll take you up on that. Is six alright?”

“We’ll be there, Mona, thank you. I hope Evie feels better by then.” Susan wiped her hands on a towel and showed her friend out.

“Oh, she’ll be fine. My girl’s strong.”

Billy grew bright pink. *Fuck.*

Susan came back to sit down. Got a few bite in before Neil stood and kissed her cheek. Dug a few bills out of his wallet.

“Make what you like, have it ready.”

“Thank you, honey.” She jumped when Neil unceremoniously smacked the back of Billy’s head.

“What!” He cringed away in his chair, dropping the fork with a clatter.

“You see the kind of attention you get when you look like a fucking fa-”

“She was just being nice.” Billy shot back.

Neil sneered and was already making his way out. Max wordlessly reached to pick up the fork and settled it next to his plate. She eyed him again once the door slammed and Neil made his way to work. Susan stared at her cold eggs.

“We should go.” Max sighed. Something happened between him and Evie. Something ugly. “To the salon.”

“You hate that shit.” Billy lost his appetite and sat back. Pushing up out of his chair.

“We’ll need a ride anyways. Neil always has the car and it’s better than the bus.”

“Do I look like I’m your damn taxi?” Billy snapped. Noted Susan flinching, but she didn’t get between them. Max sat straighter. Too calm and observant.

“No, you look sad.”

“Fuck off.” Billy shoved up and left his plate there.

“Maxine.” Susan stood. “Billy-”

A door slammed. Max debated it and went after him.

“Don’t, he’s upset.” Susan snatched her daughter’s wrist.

“Yeah and he’s not Neil.” Max slipped off, leaving Susan to frown at her plate and pull her sleeves down a little lower.

Summoning more courage, Max knocked.

“Go away.” Came the muffled reply she ignored. Pushing in. “Just fucking go away.”

Billy was under the covers. Having tossed his jeans and shoes aside. He didn’t raise his voice, it only got raspier.

“Didn’t you take Evie to that party? What happened?” Max shut the door. Crossed toward the bed.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“She came home before you. This orange car passed when I was sitting in the open garage fixing my wheel. I saw Evie come out at the end of the street and go home. She looked upset.”

“An orange car?”

“Yeah, like a rusty orange. Old car too, a Plymouth like my dad used to drive. I saw a man in the front seat. He looked like a dad too. Evie was in the car with him.”

Billy’s head lifted to see her. Max didn’t often see this look on her brother’s face. Horror.

“A dad?”

“I don’t know, it was weird. He didn’t drop her off at her house. He passed it and she walked back.” Max shrugged, dared to sit on the bed when Billy pushed up.

“Did you see his face?”

“I think I’ve seen him before, I don’t know where. I was too far away. He kinda looked like Neil. Lighter hair.”

“Mustache. Blond.” Billy’s eyes searched. He got up. “Gotta shower.”

“Billy, what’s going on?”

“Nothing, Max.” A dismissive hand waved. “Just stay out of it.”

“You messed up, didn’t you?” She paused when he whirled around. Thought he’d get upset. But, he only exhaled and turned to go. Stopping again when his thought was too much.

“Max, you know not to get into cars with older guys. Right? Even if they’re pretty? Even if they call you pretty too.” Billy found her eyes and looked defeated. Something else rare for him to show.

“Duh.” Max shrugged. A beat. “You haven’t told Neil about Lucas.”

"You haven't knocked my dick in the dirt with a fucking nail bat. Don't care that you see boys as long as they don't... Just don't let Neil know you hang out with them." He opened the door. "Out."

Max beamed a little.

"Apologize to Evie." She passed with an obvious huff.

As if it was that easy.

** ** *

"Mom, I really don't feel good." Evie mopped around in a robe after taking a long shower. Mona was touching her forehead. A barely there graze before she went to sort some items in the cupboard.

"You feel fine. It's just dinner. Socializing is good for the soul."

"Mom, I really don't."

"Evie, just smile for a few hours. Please, I want them to feel welcome. You can do that." Mona waved her hand about.

Evie shut her mouth. Flashed teeth beyond twitching lips. Moved to go off into her room where Bourbon sat sleeping. His eyes cracked before he gave a purr and resumed slumber.

"Least one of us had a good New Years." Evie organized some empty decorative boxes and dishes on one of her bookshelves. Hummed in thought at another shelf full of collectibles. Felt the cool metal of an antique key no bigger than her pinkie.

It tasted vaguely bloody. Clanked around in her mouth. Harsher than the button. Such a forbidden thing. That much was almost thrilling. Evie tried once to push it down. Choked. Coughed it up onto her desk with a small clatter.

Just grin and bear it. You can suck it up, Mona said in her head. Encouragement. Always necessary. Evie picked up the key, spit trails came from it. Forced it to the back of her tongue. Swallowed once. Twice.

It seeped awkwardly down. Dropped into her stomach with the few buttons she'd eaten too.

Evie wondered if they'd dance with her as she navigated the world. Falling back into bed. Debating the musical clicking sounds underscored by growing flowers inside her.

She thought of Fredrick winding around her frame. Kissing her jaw. Teaching her things. There was a soft boy before him, but he'd moved out of state. Mr. Bowers plucked her off the floor after her father left. Talked about how it was forbidden too, but it never stopped him from kissing her.

This is so wrong. Kiss. But, you're irresistible. Kiss. The world just doesn't understand. Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.

It was funny how you could be so desired by a person who also constantly tells you it's wrong.

But, that won't stop them. Excess skin. Age. What would bother people more if they knew?

She'd sit on his bed and he'd join her. Put his hand up her leg and...

"Evie!" Mona called. "Can you help me here? I won't let you stay in that room all day for New Years."

Evie sprang up to gulp air. Held it. Felt in total control of her existence.

"Coming."

** **

Evie hung back when the knocks rang. Stuck her head in the freezer and swallowed an ice cube whole. Wondered if this new habit would ruin her appetite. Wondered why she wasn't horrified and ashamed of herself. It was just so quiet when it happened. Soothing. None of the ugly white noise in her daily life clustered.

Nobody needed to know. It was wrong, that wouldn't stop her.

“Honey! Come in and say hello.”

Another ice cube slid down her throat. Felt like good practice.

Wiping cold, wet fingers on her denim skirt, Evie appeared around the corner to see the Hargroves standing in her living room. Billy tried to catch her eyes.

“Hi,” a shy wave followed, “Happy New Year.”

“Evie, you look so pretty today.” Susan crossed to greet her with a dish. “I made cherry cheesecake for dessert.”

“Looks good, thank you, I’ll put it in the kitchen.” Evie pulled it from her hands. Candied and red on top of fluffy filling.

“Mona, I insist on helping.” Susan had gone on.

“You’re my guest, Susan.” Mona looked up from Neil’s hand. Pressed in a nice polo and blue slacks. He offered a little bouquet of snapdragons tied together with tissue paper and twine. Also had a bottle of white wine. “It’s almost ready, please sit at the table. Evie just set it.”

Evie snuck out of the kitchen again and saw Billy there staring pointed at her with an expression she couldn’t read. Averted her eyes to the little redhead next to him.

“Hey, Max, enjoying break?”

“While it lasts,” she glanced up at her brother as Evie shuffled away. Mona handed her the flowers to put in a vase. “That bad?” Max addressed Billy quietly.

“Yeah.”

Evie looked at him like he was nothing to her. No anger, no sadness. Just a big, gaping nothing.

Somehow that was worse.

“The flowers are lovely, Mr. Hargrove. Thank you.” Evie came out

to settle the vase on a side table in the dining room as he pulled out a chair for Susan.

“We’re neighbors. Neil and Susan are fine, Evie.” He was all sweetness. The doting husband. Billy crept around the corner with Max.

“I should help my mom.” Evie made herself disappear.

“It smells good.” Max crossed to sit down as well across from Billy.

“I made something special from home. Jambalaya. Tried to go easy on the spice for your stomachs.” Mona brought a dish in after Evie sent some fresh rolls at the table. Her cheeks flush because her mother sat down too quick. The only free spot was the opposite head of the table between Max and Billy.

She suppressed a groan and crossed to take it. Offered sodas to Billy and Max wordlessly.

“Would you like to join me in the prayer?” Mona offered her hands out to Neil and Max.

“Of course.” Neil only smiled. Evie shifted in her seat. Felt Billy’s eyes burn. Took Max’s hand and stared at Billy’s open palm. Was this a game to him?

She took it. Squeezed it maybe a little too tight. Stared ruefully at her empty plate. Max noticed Billy’s knuckles pale and smirked at his tense expression.

“Bless us, Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty, through Christ. Bless the Hargroves, we are truly grateful to have them join us tonight. Please guide our children through a successful year, we pray. Amen.” Mona smiled. “Please dig in. I always make so much.”

“Allow me.” Neil plucked up the wine and poured three glasses for the adults.

“First Christmas and New years in our town. I have to ask if it was a memorable one?” Mona started conversation. The rolls and dishes

were passed around.

“First white Christmas we’ve ever seen, it was beautiful.” Susan radiated.

As the adults chattered about boring Christmas gifts, Max turned to Evie.

“Mom got me some of that felting stuff, you can teach me how to do it now.” She flashed a smile. “Can you show me after dinner?”

“Sure.” Evie was tearing her roll into two pieces. Eyed the butter next to Billy and decided to eat it without. “Eager to stab something a million times into a cute shape?”

“Duh.” Max kicked Billy’s ankle. Tried to get him to speak, but he shoved a huge bite of rice into his mouth. “Maybe I can show, El.”

“El?” Evie sipped her soda.

“This new girl I’m hanging out with. Chief Hopper’s kid, he wants her to have more girl friends.” Max chuckled, twirling her fork around. “We didn’t...get along at first, but it’s better now. We found things in common.”

Another kick at Billy’s shin. He glared. Nudged her foot back.

“Easier when you’re younger.” Evie remarked.

“We’re gonna find Evie a talent agent this summer,” Mona had spoken across the way, “she won all these competitions these last few summers. Sung for the governor himself at an event when she was only thirteen.”

“Mom...” Evie blushed. She loved this food and today, it looked ghastly somehow.

“Being a singer is difficult work.” Neil spoke. “How are you going to make money in the meantime?”

“She’s good,” Billy found his voice, “real good. She can make money singing.” A cold stare penetrated. “Miss Mona, weren’t you a

pageant queen?”

That turned the adult conversation for the rest of the dinner. Mona and Susan prattled with Neil stuck between them. Miserable and having to hide it. Billy turned to Evie. Smirked.

“Can you pass the butter?” She blinked at him. Reached for another roll.

Billy cocked his head and handed it over. Evie didn’t want to fall into those pretty eyes again. Listened to her mother and Susan chatter eagerly with Neil chewing and nodding every so often.

Evie saw him fill his glass of wine three times.

“Let me help you clear this for dessert.” Susan was stacking plates so Evie got up to help. Neil drank his last glass down as he sat back. Clearly *extremely* relaxed.

“Neither of you are going to offer extra hands?” He’d barked under the sound of dishes in the sink and the TV in the next room.

“It’s fine, we have it.” Evie came to set the pie down at the center of the table. Neil snatched her wrist to observe her expression. Eyebrows lifting.

“You’re a very kind, young girl, Evie. You should sing us something.” Alcohol on his breath welled hot. He was drunk and hiding it better than most. Barely ate any dinner because the spices weren’t for him.

Max’s fists clenched on the table and Billy moved like he might stand up.

“Oh, I couldn’t.” Evie replied, another bout of strawberries crept up her cheeks.

“Can’t be a singer if you’re shy.” He chuckled.

“She was sick this morning, she probably shouldn’t.” Billy came out of his chair carefully. Eyes direct on his dad clutching Evie’s wrist.

The fingers loosened so she crossed behind Billy. Paused there so Neil could see who her shield was. Got back into a chair.

Billy slowly sat back down.

Neil would deal with him later.

“Susan, this looks delightful. I hope you’re willing to share the recipe. I haven’t mastered the cheesecake yet.” Mona ushered her friend back in. Neither felt the tension as Neil and Billy stared at each other. Not stopping when the cake was cut and passed around.

“I’ll write it down for you.” Susan offered Billy a piece, caught Neil’s eyes. “Neil says that’s what made him fall for me. Way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

Neil pressed this tight smile and laughed with the two ladies. None of the kids followed.

“Better if you just go through his chest.” Max had mumbled. Stabbing a bright red cherry with her fork. Evie suppressed the urge to snicker. Swallowed the sweet treat and excused herself when the meal ended. Max trailed after.

“Want to show me? No plans tonight.”

“Sure.” Evie twitched a smile.

Mona was pulling Susan out onto the back deck while Evie grabbed a basket she kept her craft items in. A body blocked her in the hallway.

“Evie, can I see you outside?” Neil wasn’t particularly tall, but he certainly had a presence.

Her eyes went steady on Billy at the end of the hallway behind him.

“Yes, sir.” She glanced again and Billy disappeared. “Max, want to use my desk? You’ve seen my room, I can show you this. Don’t mind Bourbon snoring, he’s been extra tired today.”

“Yeah, sure.” Max took it after an uneasy beat so Evie followed Neil out front.

“It was a lovely dinner, I don’t go much for exotic food.”

“From New Orleans, Louisiana.” Evie replied flatly. “I guess.” Neil was all pleasantries. Shifting on his feet and breath smelling of wine.

“You just seem nervous around Billy. My boy has a history.” He gestured. “Not a very nice history with girls like you.”

“Girls like me?” Evie’s nervous hands rubbed together in front of her. Shoulder’s lifting.

“Girls who are just a little...” Bigger. Darker. Stranger. Exotic. “Different.”

“Billy and I...Well, we don’t really talk.”

It was clear Neil wanted some admission out of her. Just for the sake of it.

“I just mean, if my boy has been unkind to you. I’d like to know about it. Billy gets into trouble and it’s my job to keep him out of it.” Neil stepped in. “You’re a very nice girl, boys take advantage. That’s all I’m saying.”

“We...” Evie’s lip wobbled. “We don’t talk, sorry. Billy hasn’t...”

“If my boy steps out of line, Evie, I’d like to know about it.” Neil smiled again. “Tell your mother I said thank you for dinner. No doubt, she’ll keep Susan busy another hour.”

“Sure.” Evie watched him step down the porch. Stumbled and recovered quick. “Goodnight.”

The moment Neil went into his house, no doubt for another bottle, Billy slid out of the front door.

“You didn’t say anything. To your mom or anyone.” He observed plainer. Unreadable. “Why?”

“Your dad’s gone, Billy, we don’t have to pretend anymore.” Evie replied without a tone. Stepping around him. Sparing him a beating maybe. No emotion to give him.

He wasn’t worth it.

That replayed over and over again. No tears, no anger. Just ice. Cool and sleek.

Evie went back into her house.

Billy decided another night in his car away from Cherry Lane was better.

** **

“You can glue the eyes in now.” Evie applied some from a tube and pushed two tiny eyes into Max’s project.

“Looks like a monster.” Max snickered at the hideous yellow blob. “It was supposed to be a baby chick.”

“Ah, takes practice. Just keep stabbing. Give it to your mom, she’ll display and love it forever because you made it.” They sat at her desk under a little lamp. Max looked at Evie twisting wool around to make a shape, plucked up the project she’d made. “Kinda strange, you stab something a million times until it’s pretty. Keeps my hands busy though.”

“Trying to stay distracted?” Max piped in. Bourbon lifted his head behind them and wandered over for pets.

“When you get older, all you want is distractions.” Evie shrugged her shoulders and sat back. Let her cat sweep their legs.

“What happened with you and Billy?”

“Huh? Nothing.” Evie managed to smile.

“I know he took you to a party and...he came home without you looking trashed like he crawled out of a dumpster.” Max paused. “Someone else took you home.”

“I just got a ride from another friend. I don’t rage like Billy does.” Lie.

“You’re mad at him.”

“I’m not mad. I don’t...” *I don’t want to feel anything.* Sadness and fury. They weren’t to be processed or discussed. They made you ungrateful.

“Did you have a bad time? Did he get mad? He gets mad and does stupid stuff.” Mad Max was too sharp for this entire bland town. Evie sucked in her cheeks.

“No, I had a great time actually. That was the problem.” A wave crashed into her. Covered in metallic confetti. Magical. Crushing.

“What happened?” Max pressed.

“It’s not for me to say, I don’t want to-” Evie sprang up and the door opened.

“Sorry girls, Susan was headed out.” Mona dipped in without knocking. “Having fun?”

“Yeah.” Max stood up. “Thanks, Evie, I’ll keep practicing. As long as it takes.” Felt like she was hinting at something else.

“Night, Max.” Evie watched her mother show the younger girl out. Quickly swept her craft supplies back into a basket and plucked up her old cat. Listened to him purr. Decided another long night of sleep and late morning was better.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone for reading!! Chat with me below or on my tumblr, Alias_B

7. One Bad Kiss Constellation

Notes for the Chapter:

New Year and school is back in session after winter break. Billy starts the grovelling process and observes some new things about Evie. TW: PICA-it's worse. Vomiting. Animal death mention. Student/Teacher relationship in the background. School bullies.

The first day back to school was uglier than Evie pictured. Fall of snow didn't get them out of classes.

Her stomach was already in knots, but that could have been the shiny things she'd eaten the night before.

Felt like a game. What would pass. What would tie her stomach up. These little trinkets she actually dug for, cleaned with bleach, and stacked on that empty shelf. Organized each item. Admired her display of will and control. Mostly keys and buttons. Couple nuts from a toolbox in their garage.

So far, everything came out. So far. Evie wondered what her insides would look like and tried to slow. Tried despite all the noise.

Calculus was first. Thankfully, she shared it with Heather who was all smiles. Chattering about her surprise mini trip with her parents.

They had it with Tommy and Carol too. All the fucking grins and looks Evie got burned. Tommy peering then shifting to Carol's ear so she could giggle.

Evie's pencil snapped within her fist so Heather glanced aside to see the pieces roll away.

"Okay, muscles." She chuckled, passing a freshly sharpened one over.

"Thanks."

"So, what'd you do for New Years?" All the scratching of lead on

paper was driving Evie insane. Grating like an out of tune orchestra of vibrating strings.

“Just some lame party, the usual.” Evie was rubbing the back of her neck. Eyes glued to the page.

Carol giggled again. Fingernails sunk into the skin of Evie's hairline.

“Don't know what her problem is.” Heather remarked to herself.

Evie shook her head. Lips pressing with no sound. Trying to focus on the problems along the page and not the ones fizzling in her life. Her desk was pressed into the far right wall next to all the campy posters teachers loved to decorate their rooms in.

About how there's always a silver lining and chase the morning.

Evie rolled her eyes at the thought. Caught sight of a sleek thumbtack there sticking out. Shiny and chrome. Lungs pulsed and she wondered about the weight on her tongue.

Strange how her mouth watered for it.

Two fingers subtly snatched it from the wall when the bell rang.

Second period was usually what she was excited about. English with Bowers and the sly smiles they beamed at each other across the room. Carol always looked between them. Jealous she wasn't the hot teacher's pet. She noticed a great deal there.

Evie shared the class with Steve also. And Billy who sat in the next row over just behind her. He stared at Evie, trying to read every twitch and shift of her body. A note hit her desk from Steve.

Brown eyes peered up as if to ask who it was being passed to, but he cocked his chin at her.

Fredrick sat quietly at his desk as they worked separately today. He didn't see her unfold it.

What's up with Hargrove? Looks like he's trying to vaporize you with

his laser eyes.

Evie hitched to stop herself from laughing at a picture with a stick figure and a mullet. Lasers blasting out of the eyes. She added some comically large muscles. Cleared her throat and wrote back.

He's a creep.

Steve quirked a darling smile at her.

Billy saw a flash of stark, bloody red. Harrington made her grin without force.

“Okay, class, let’s see who read the material. Pass your papers up.” Fredrick stood to collect. “I’ll be reading these tonight and- Ah, Mr. Hargrove. Thank you for the scribbling of your Camaro. I hope the essay question is as detailed.”

“Been thinking about upgrading my girl, sir. Say, what do you drive?” Billy tapped his pencil, lazy as can be. “Cool guy, I bet.”

“Just a Plymouth. We muscle cars have to stick together.” Fredrick was pulling stacks of papers from the front. Billy didn’t drop it.

“That orange one? Yeah. I’ve seen it around.” Blue eyes drew to Evie at that. She felt a chill and peered back with a stony expression. “Bet the girlies all line up.”

A few classmates chuckled for their glorious king.

“It gets me from point A to B. That’s all I ask for.” Bowers only laughed.

"I'm sure it does." Billy mused coolly, fingers twisting his ring which caught the light.

The bell blared.

“Alright, class. We’re starting a new unit tomorrow. I hope you all have your Shakespeare hats ready.”

A collective groan sounded.

Evie rushed out to Yearbook with Jonathan, Nancy, and Heather. Only class she had where Seniors and Juniors mixed. Besides lunch if that counted. Got lost in dark rooms so the world couldn't see her hands shaking.

"Here." Jonathan caught her trying to clip some photos up, fumbling with a stack.

"Thanks," Evie sighed, "too many pages for our losing sports teams, right?"

He chuckled at that.

"My thoughts exactly."

Jonathan went to help Nancy order some drafted pages when Heather crossed over. Eyes on Evie working.

"Something the matter?"

"Bourbon's not doing well. I expected it, but...he's just been with me through all of it. You know?" A frown etched. She didn't want to cry. Heather paused to hug Evie from behind.

"He's our little prince still. I'm sorry."

Her friend shifted out, pressed a smile and went back to work in silence. Groaned because Billy was in half these basketball photos. Alight and intense.

"Hey, I'm going to the library for lunch." Evie spoke after that bell rang. "I'll scarf my sandwich on the way."

Heather observed her again. Watched how Evie avoided her eyes.

"Was...something else going on? I feel like I-"

"No, just missing the break." Evie flashed her teeth to make it convincing.

She did manage to get half the sandwich down and tossed the rest out. Patted cold water on her cheeks once she was alone in the

bathroom as everyone went to lunch. The hallway got quieter and Evie looked at her flushed face. Shuddered and reached for the pin in her pocket. Small. Deft. Dainty.

Stark point. Catching the light.

She washed it with soap. Opened her mouth to stick her tongue out. Cradled it there. Chrome and out of place against pink flesh. Lips closed. The point pressed down into her tongue. Evie winced. Tried to swallow and choked it back into her hand. Saliva dripping.

A spot of red welled. Loud and obscene and horrible. Tasting metal. Shame. Tears pooled.

So she pushed it back in like she'd done with the key to drown the noise out. Evie Fenny wasn't a fucking quitter.

Swallow. Swallow. Swallow.

It scratched going down. Working around clenching muscles. Pangs fluttered. Fingers grasped the sink to bite a groan back.

Evie thought she heard the little *plink* of it hitting her stomach. Gasp to breathe. There wasn't shame anymore, only pride. She powered through it. Had utter control.

Eyes locked with the mirror. Calm. Collected. Not in this body. Rust turned to sweet strawberries and rose petals.

Imagine stabbing something several times until it was beautiful.

Exhale.

** ** *

Carol and her gaggle still kept the laughter up in the cafeteria. She sat upon the table with Tommy next to her. Animated stories kept them hanging upon dripping syllables. Heather couldn't stand it anymore. Pushed up to cross right over.

"What's your problem today?" She cocked her hip.

“Oooh.” Carol clicked her glittery nails on the table. “So touchy, sweet pea.”

“What’s your problem with Evie, she didn’t do anything to you?”

“Other than her being a tart for Bowers. Nothing to me. In fact, she provides us with hours of entertainment. Had a hot date with the Keg King.” Carol nodded toward Billy across the way, sitting alone and clicking his lighter. Annoyed, he got up and went to sneak his usual lunch smoke.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Uh, isn’t Fenny your BFF?” Tina chimed in. “Shouldn’t you know?”

“Aw, that’s so cute, she didn’t tell you.” Tommy added with his crooked smile. “Must be so embarrassed. Poor girl.”

“You have five seconds-”

“I’m gonna tell you.” Carol decided. Finger curling to bring Heather in. “Only because it’s just too good.”

** ** *

Billy got one puff in before Princess Heather Holloway was smacking the cigarette from his fingers. Snarling and bright red to match the cute bow in her hair.

“Hey!”

“Hey yourself, what the fuck?” She pushed Billy clear into the brick wall. Chilled him more than the breeze. A new flutter of snow began to fall with no peace in sight. Her face was flushed cherry with anger. “I know about your little Skirt Safari bullshit! You tricked Evie! You hurt my friend...you’re an asshole.”

Billy just sagged at her. Reached to pluck up his cigarette and got it slapped again. Heather crushed it with her expensive shoe for good measure.

“You had no right to do something so disgusting! Carol and Tommy filled me in.”

His brow lifted.

“...Evie didn't tell you?”

“The last thing Evie wants is for people to see her in pain, so I know you hurt her bad.” Her arms crossed. “Well?” A cold breath puffed.

“It wasn't supposed to-”

“You mean, she wasn't supposed to find out about the bet. You're so selfish. You're a selfish little prick. Stay the hell away from my friend.”

She turned and a hand snatched her wrist.

“Heath-”

“What?” She shrugged with some extra ire. Eyes flickering like flames. “I think you've done enough.”

Billy let her go, looked elsewhere. No syllables to make her stop fuming. Heather huffed at him and marched back inside to find Evie at her locker. Shoulders dropped.

“Hey...” Heather's slow approach still gave Evie a fright. Huge doe eyes looking far too somber.

A sigh.

“Who told you?”

“Carol and those jerks.” Heather pressed her lips. “Just scared Hargrove shitless, I think. I'm sorry, I wish you told me. You said you'd tell me things.”

“This thing... It doesn't matter. He tricked me, whatever.” Evie's arms went out then dropped. She faced her locker. Toyed with the handle and pressed her book closer. “It was all stupid. For a moment,

I thought he... I thought a boy might-”

“He’s a little prick.” Heather turned her friend around.

“We had fun. We danced. I kissed him first. Did Carol tell you that part?” Evie sucked in some air.

"Oh?"

“Yeah, I kissed him and I was going to screw him too. I was gonna go to a motel with Billy Hargrove for New Years and, you know, I...I wanted to. I really wanted him... But, it doesn’t matter. They can talk about it all they like.” She moved to go, slamming her locker shut. “I don’t care. It won’t bother me. It’s stupid. All of it.”

“Evie, don’t shut down, please.”

“I’m fine.” Sneakers skidded when Heather stepped in front of her. "Boys like Billy Hargrove don't go for girls like me. He doesn't want me. That's not news."

Evie remembered all the hot bodies jumping around. The crowds and fireworks blasting along with a musical beat. Moments where she'd felt incandescently delighted next to Billy and the lingering of their starry eyes. Like they'd been meant to find each other all this time.

"Getting mad about this is the same as being upset about the pattern of stars. It's pointless." Evie swallowed a thicker lump down.

No, that's what ached. Billy made her believe they could be rewritten. Made her want to defy the stars.

“Let’s hang out this weekend. A *no boys* party for both of us.” Heather smiled, taking Evie's hand. “He’s not even a boy, Eve, he’s a little prick. Let’s just have some fun. Friday? Sleepover. You pick the first movie.”

“I’m fine, Heath,” the words sounded funny now, “but okay. Sleepover.”

“Good.” A brighter smile crossed so Evie matched it. She let

Heather hug her and managed to make it through classes all the way to her free period avoiding Billy's eyes on her skull. Sneaking out was an art form she'd perfected. Quick steps to her locker and toward the door. Stopping only to see into the theater when stage lights turned rose red.

Evie peeked in. Beamed.

"Mr. B." She shuffled inside after checking the hallway. "Fredrick."

"I'm alone, Evie, come sit with me." He patted the table next to the lightboard he was working on. The glow changed to a softer pink. Made it all less menacing. Bathed in blush, she crossed the illumination and scooted up onto the cool surface. Skirt shifting over black tights. "Bad day?"

"Bad start to the year."

"Classmates? I can always fail them for you." He'd joked.

She smiled, head shaking so he continued.

"They're intimidated by you, Evie, because you're too ahead and mature for them. Soon, you'll be out in the world and they'll be left stumbling." He peeked up behind a pair of glasses. This was old times. Encouragement. Nurturing. "Much like the director of the winter show who asked me to fix this damn thing last minute."

She giggled then, touching her lips.

"You look pretty in this light. You should wear pink more often, instead of red." He remarked and she crossed her ankles. Hands gripping the edge.

"Red makes me look and feel older." Evie asserted herself.

"What about that wet gloss you used to wear in class?" His finger brushed her knee before he was picking up a screwdriver.

"Thought you didn't like to kiss me with gloss on, you said it was too sticky."

"I appreciate it more now that I've lost it. Just like you, Evie. You were there for me. It's something special to have a person. Don't you think?" He winked. Fredrick Bowers made her laugh and smile. Listened to her and gave back. Most days.

All she longed for was to impress him. Please him. Be enough for someone.

"It's not fair that I cannot kiss you here." He uttered. "Now. I'd like to."

"*Just* kiss me?" Evie flicked some curls, drew her fingers across her collar so he fixated there.

Played this version of herself that came out around him. This woman in red with cool words. Always game. She bit her lip and he paused to see her again. A smile crossed before they were interrupted.

Evie looked up as the door opened and Carol stood there. A glare already on her pouty face. Fredrick scooted a good few inches from Evie. Quickly.

"Sorry, I just had some questions about the reading. Mr. B." Carol flashed a smile.

"Of course, Carol. My door is always open. Evie, thank you for the inquires. I'll be getting back with you. Soon."

Evie perked and got up.

"I'll hold you to that... We just finished. Thanks, Mr. B. For all the help." She seemed all too chipper at Carol going green with envy. The redhead knocked into her shoulder passing, but Evie gripped her bag and went out. Frowned at the snow piling because she'd ridden her bike in.

Still, Evie was stubborn, so she got on and pedaled down the street. Sleet making it more difficult when a fucking Camaro revved down the way behind her. Billy honked once and got ignored. Pulled up in front of her and skidded over which sent Evie into a pile of frosty, dead leaves. Tumbling.

"Hell." She just laid there until Billy Hargrove was in the line of sight. Craning to see her and utterly stunning against the opal skies. "What's it going to take for you to leave me alone, huh? Three hundred bucks?" She untwisted from her bike and Billy yanked her up, brushing snow aside until he got smacked off with two heated expressions penetrating.

"You're screwing Bowers, aren't you?" He'd hissed it.

Oof.

"You're delusional." Evie charged past him. Legs aching as she pushed her bike.

"Max saw you in his car. He's always looking at you. Is that where you go when you sneak out your window three times a week?"

"No!" Evie swiveled. Breath ghosting.

"But, you're still fucking him." Billy slid in front, hands on the bike handles to stop her again. There was a struggle. Her cheeks puffing as she feebly tried to push him back. Teeth clenched.

"You don't know what you're talking about. Will you just move?" Her entire face scrunched together. All daggers. Slowing, Evie spelled it out for him. Drew closer. "And no one will *ever* believe you."

"You think I'm trying to make your life worse, Angel? I just want you to admit it."

"Admit, what? You have major issues? Fine! Easy! Now move!" She barely got a few inches forward with his muscles bulging. Two immovable objects.

"Open those pretty lips and say it. You're fucking our teacher. I wanna hear it from that mouth." Billy paused, chest shuddering. "You went to him after what I did. I should have stayed with you."

"I don't owe you any of this. You're obsessed!" She shoved into him. No budging, the boy was made of steel.

"He's a fucking *pedophile*. We had those in California too, chica.

Maybe they don't like the term round these parts. You think he's making you feel good, but he's setting you on fire to warm himself. That fuse is creeping, babe." Billy pushed back until she was sliding toward his car. Slush wetting their shoes.

"You're unbelievable!"

"I'm not looking to tell anyone, got that?" Billy caught her gaze in the teetering. Held it. "I'm just saying you don't have to do it. Anyone ever tell you that you don't have to do something, Evangeline?"

Evie stopped pushing to stare with bigger eyes as he continued. Expression crestfallen because something resonated.

"Being a good girl has a cost, you do everything people tell you to do until your organs start spilling."

"I'm not the only one with a front. Fuck you!"

A beat.

"You almost did that night." Billy cocked his head. "I would have made you moan so pretty. I wanted to." Evie's mouth dropped before she shoved him into the snow. Bike falling away. He looked thrilled. About to pitch a fucking denim tent. "There you are. I would have fucked you so hard and so good, babe. Bet you even taste like heaven and stardust. Yeah? Fucking hit me."

"Hit you?" Evie stilled over him. "You're just trying to make yourself feel better. Fuck off, Billy." She yanked at her bike again. He puffed there, chest sinking before he shot back up. Newfound vigor.

Growled.

"I'm sorry."

Even the snow stilled with him. She swerved and saw him crack.

"Evie, I'm fucking sorry, okay? I'm shit at this and I'm sorry. I'm sorry I took you to that stupid dance and screwed you over. I'm sorry you got hurt. I am sorry, got it!"

"You're sorry that you got caught." She pointed.

"I'm not leaving you alone."

"Listen, Billy," Evie spun and dropped her bike, "I don't need anything from you. Nothing. Okay? Just let it go, I really don't know why you can't. Be sorry somewhere else. The stars are where they are. Life goes on."

"Fuck the stars! They're too far away to stop us. I kissed you after midnight. I gave the fucking money away. I wanted out of it and I fucked up. I did. I'd change that, but I wouldn't change the night with you. Hear me? I didn't lie about that much." He strained to catch those brown eyes.

She opened her mouth and closed it quicker. Almost softened.

"I didn't fake that and I was shitty to take you to that place. That fucker Tannen used me to get back at you and I'm fucking *sorry* about it." Billy seemed to rage the thoughts out. "You liked it too. The kiss. Don't pretend you didn't."

"If you call *that* a kiss." Sarcasm seeped out.

"Yeah, I recall us sharing a couple." Billy laughed. Dry and disbelieving. "I was drunk, but I remember every damn second of how you felt."

"You're not fooling me again." Evie crushed in on herself, pressed onward. Skidding to go away from Billy Hargrove. What the hell could he possibly want out of this?

"I'll leave you alone," Billy sprang forward and grabbed her back wheel, "if you kiss me again and tell me it's nothing. Just one more. Redo it. Yeah? To hell with the stars, we'll change them."

She looked in awe at him. Shoulders dropped.

"It wasn't even that good of a kiss."

"Then, what do you have to lose over another bad one?" Billy's head tilted up. Wild as can be. Evie matched it. Both of their curls moving

up against the sweep of cold winds. Hungry looks about them. Billy undid her with a damning utter. "Prove me wrong, Angel."

He fucking triple dog dared her.

Evie practically kicked her bike aside, stomped toward him, and grabbed his face to smash their lips together. Billy pounced back with a barely there sound. Shoved Evie into the side of his car.

Another vehicle honked and went around them. Probably too shocked to do much else with teenagers unable to control their hormones in the middle of the road.

Moaning like he was in a porno, Billy made this one count. Hands palmed at her ass, bringing Evie up a few inches. Tongue down her throat near ready to prick himself on the pin she'd swallowed.

She hitched as he pulled her hair to see lush hooded eyes again. But, briefly.

"Yeah?" He twisted those curls around, both of them moaned. Challenge dancing. *You like that, Angel?* Evie's fingers were clutching at his jacket. A nod followed. She let him trail his tongue against her lips and opened her mouth for it again. Tasted spearmint.

Drunken bodies kept moving and smacking back into his car. Billy even tried to pull her shirt up out of her skirt to touch the flesh underneath. Evie jolted out from him, having not been ravished like that by a boy so unafraid to touch her.

And she shuddered apart. Kept her eyes closed so Billy did too.

It was the only way to prolong this. A softer kiss where their noses brushed after. Foreheads pressing together. Ardent and lovely. Total silence was a thrill. Billy nuzzled his nose into her own again, pulling her body into his. Fingers crept barely under her shirt. Caressed the tender skin. Lungs and hearts needy beyond repair.

Constellations twisting together until a single question dawned. *Can I keep you?*

Evie quaked for air and saw him. Lashes long and too beautiful.

Freckles. Snow falling like confetti. An ache flooded back. The pin pricks in her tongue jabbed. Arms pushed up at him. Felt the thumping in his chest.

Holding his jaw steady, lipstick smeared to damn them both.

“Do you always kiss the same way a thirsty dog laps at water?” She shoved him backwards. A spit trail left their mouths. Red glistened on Billy’s lips and chin. A sleazy grin cracked, tongue wiggling out to taste her still on him. Neither could breathe right.

“Haven’t had complaints.” He gasped for air. “Are you judging my technique?”

“Yeah, it sucks.” Evie puffed with more force. “And I felt nothing. Got it? Nothing. Leave me alone now.”

“You’re a shitty liar.” He watched her swerve.

“And you’re a shitty person!” She wiped her mouth. Billy stopped dead, dropped everything he was feeling to let that pierce him. “I felt nothing! Leave me alone.”

“No.” Billy decided as she plucked her bike up.

“No?”

"You heard me." A child. "No. Nope. *Nada*."

"But, you just said-"

“I fucking lied and now you know how it’s done.” He went around his car. “Maybe I’m a shitty person, but at least I don’t hate myself enough to lie and screw-”

“Spare me!” Evie screamed over him. Chilling. She got onto her bike and went down a dirt path so Billy couldn’t follow her.

“Fuck.” Billy slammed his car door getting back in. Revved up again, hitting the wheel. “Fuck!”

He’d made it worse.

** ** *

Billy made an attempt to leave Evie Fenny alone. Sorta. Didn't even stare at her in school. Didn't bring up Bowers. Pretended he didn't hear her sneaking out to wherever.

He even tried screwing other girls. Drinking and partying to forget.

Another problem came with that.

He couldn't keep his shit up. Tried everything. Got into bed with two girls and stayed soft. Pretended he was just too smashed.

All he saw was Evie Fenny looking at him with her huge, sad eyes. It made him furious and he tried to hate her. Tried to jerk himself off and only thought of her lipstick smearing his skin. Her amber perfume drowning his senses. Her body flush against his.

Then, he was coming.

He felt like shit about all of it and that turned to rage. No hate came, it just burnt.

Meanwhile, Evie was lining pins and screws up for her collection. She wrote down every little thing she ate and what came out.

It was supposed to all come out eventually and she'd be there to control it.

She thought of the amethyst gemstone sparkling inside her and wondered how such a thing could make her feel so happy and alive.

Even when her stomach began to ache with little pricks through the day. Even when her appetite was often ruined. Even with she tried again at times to stop it for good. The cravings undid her.

She smiled through the pain just like she was taught. A woman's disposition.

I am fine. This is fine.

Something collided distantly. Two arrows through the same heart.

Spitting blood everywhere.

One night, Evie wasn't sneaking out.

Billy still heard her scratching around the side of the house. Couldn't help peeking to see her dragging a shovel. Holding a painted square under one arm. She set a decorated shoe box aside and started digging a hole just at the back corner of her house. Struggling to break ice and snow. Head bowed so wet curls covered her chilled face.

He opened his window.

"Hey."

"Go away." She sniffled. Crying.

Billy hadn't heard or seen her cry. Not even over him and what he did. Not for anything. The sound jarred him, he thought she might have been holding in laughter.

Blue eyes drew to the box again and he realized it. Bourbon. The strange cat hadn't been spying on him lately.

"Please," she turned her neck to barely peer at him through red rimmed eyes, "just go away." Evie wiped her nose and let a fresh sprinkling of snow melt on her cheeks. She still looked pretty there, utterly fatigued. Wispy, wet curls framing her splotchy expression.

"You took good care of him." Was all he said. Evie turned back. Shoulders lifting.

Billy did the only thing he could do for once.

He left Evie alone.

Listened to her hum and dig to bury the beloved cat. Billy didn't see Evie stuff a handful of soil into her pocket and go back inside to her empty house because her mother was always out with friends or working. She went to the phone in her bedroom. Luckily, Evie got her own line two Christmases ago. She dialed.

"Hello?" Her prince.

"Can I come over?" Evie sniffled. "Bourbon died."

"Who?"

"My cat." Dark eyes narrowed before she started to pick at some peeling wallpaper. "You remember?" She talked about the little ball of fuzz all the time.

"Oh, that's unfortunate, Evie." Fredrick sighed for her. "I'm not sure after what happened last weekend. I still think you need time."

She *spazzed out* as the teenagers say.

"I just...wasn't comfortable doing that. The ropes freaked me out, I can't explain it." She shook her head. "I can try again, can I come over?"

"So, now I'm just pushing you into it? Don't make me the bad guy, Evie, I won't be that. I'm here for you, but I want to go at your pace. You know that."

"No, no, you're not pushing," came the protest, "I can do it. I'll try. I just wanna see you. I need to be touched." That sentiment got her welling again.

"Evie, it's like you don't trust me to look after you." He replied in a clinical sort of way. "I'm risking everything to be with you."

"I know."

He said it often.

"You couldn't stop crying," he sniffled like he might weep over it, "you make me feel so helpless at times. Do you realize that?"

"I'm sorry..." Evie crushed into the phone as he made it about him. His needs. His inability to keep her happy. That was her fault.

"Too often, I think your head is just up in the clouds. These nightmares you have and the way you press into the wall when you

sleep. Like you don't want me to touch you. And last week, dear, you just...wouldn't *stop* crying."

"I promise I won't cry anymore." She's promised her mother that as well in silence. "I swear. I'll stop."

"This fixation on your little poems. We used to have adult conversations about the future. It's like a part of you is locked away. You don't want me to touch it. What's the matter with you?"

"Songs." Evie replied flatter.

"What?"

"They're songs, not poems."

"I just mean, you should be more practical."

"I don't know what's wrong with me." Evie decided at last. Clutching the phone cord in her shaken fist. Haunted. "I can't stop."

She didn't know if she wanted to. This cycle that was eating her.

"I got back into this because I wanted you. I see a future with us. Do you want me just as bad? Think on it. I'll give you the time. When you're ready, I'm here." Bowers advised. He wanted her to want him so bad. "We'll talk another day. Next weekend maybe."

"Fredrick, please-"

The line cut.

She'd been too needy, he like that on his terms. Liked when she crawled and when she needed him so bad. When she gave into everything he desired without a fuss. Fredrick wanted Evie, but he wanted a specific version of Evie. The bouncy girls on television game for anything, who had every answer. Fizzling emotions unsettled him. They were childish. But, he wanted her lips to be glossy and pink. Wanted her to be an adult woman in a spring breaking teen's body.

You'd think he was still married to his uptight wife and fucking the

damn babysitter.

Evie set the phone down. Stuffed a handful of dirt into her lips. Smothered herself with it. Gritty, it stuck to her teeth like an Oreo cookie. Tiny stones shifted as she tried to swallow too much at once. She got another handful in before her gag reflex choked her. Feet scrambled to puke brown and bile into the toilet.

The Lego she ate earlier came up too. Found it helping Claudia and Dustin clear their basement. Shiny and blue.

Her stomach curdled. A few tears squeezed before she was scooping that up. Slippery with acidic bile. Pushing it back into her mouth. With her throat raw, it hurt worse the second time but it went down.

Control. She was in total control. That's what she told herself. Curled up next to the toilet. Scalp heating while her lips hung slack.

"Nothing is the matter with me." Evie told herself because stopping meant that thudding ache in her chest would glow all neon and rose red.

** ** *

Billy wasn't going to leave Evie alone. He decided that after a wet dream one morning. These things were not to be taken lightly by teenage boys.

I'm sorry. It didn't cut it. Actions, that's what Susan advised, not that he'd admit prying advice from his chirpy stepmother. Vague as can be, Billy hung out in the kitchen doorway dropping rough hints.

Maxine was more blunt when Susan asked her later.

"Oh, yeah, he's totally crushing on Evie and he messed it all up." She said between the lazy crunching of salty chips.

"That's what I thought." Susan sighed. An hour of Billy barking and hiding around the doorway told Susan that much. She was young once.

"But, he did something. She's mad at him."

“Well, Neil works late tomorrow, I asked Billy if he’d take me to Mona’s salon. She wanted me to go out with her friends. A dessert and wine thing she likes to host.”

“Did you tell Neil?” Max was fixing a wheel on her skateboard and snacking. Poor thing wasn't getting use with all the snow fall. Susan only smiled.

“Would you like to go get your hair done?”

“Ick.” Max cringed at the thought of those huge rollers and hairspray.

“Max.” Susan replied carefully. “Evie works tomorrow, doesn’t she? Saturday.”

She got the idea with her eyes lighting up.

“Oh!” Max blew air out her lips. “Just this once, then.”

“That’s my girl.” Susan figured if Billy was convinced it was all her idea, the day would go smoother.

** ** *

Something else Billy Hargrove learned about Mona was her hair changed with the seasons. Locks big and bold but now a strawberry blonde. A head start for spring despite it still being January.

Evie peered up at reception and noticeably, her face fell.

Susan figured whatever happened had to be bad. She’d never seen such a reaction from a teenage girl to her drop dead gorgeous stepson. Hell, Billy Hargrove could bat his lashes and have eggs dropping in every uterus within a fifty mile radius.

Might have been why Neil preferred to lock him in his room like he was the dirty tomcat about to impregnate all the neighborhood strays. Although, Neil had a list of reasons for how he treated Billy. None of them valid.

Mona went right for Max. Squished her cheeks in smelling of

lavender hand cream.

“I’m so glad y’all are here! Maxie, I promise I won’t shock you. Just a wash and freshen. Make your hair nice and bouncy. It’ll shine. I always say: the higher the hair, the closer to God.” Mona took Susan’s hand. “C’mon over here. My new girl, Shelby, will get you started too. Little pampering does everyone good.”

“Hey.” Evie piped up, twirling a pen around. She’d eaten the cap an hour ago. Not much for chewing. Always up to the task of swallowing whole because she was a big girl.

Big girls sucked it up and swallowed.

Billy thought to go back to his car. Swayed on his feet there looking around at all the plants.

Actions.

Actions.

They speak louder than words. Billy was a screamer.

“Miss Mona, I was thinking we could... Uh, for me.”

“You want a wash too, Billy?” She perked, hair bobbing as her little platforms clicked excitedly. “Come, come, sit down. Evie can get you shampooed to start.”

Evie’s entire body locked. Billy smirked at her, but noticed an opportunity reach her eyes. The pen stabbed back into a cup. Lips spread in a devious way. He saw horns spring out of her big curls.

Fuck, she looked hot though.

It drove him wild. Evie with a fire behind her eyes. All plush curves and lingering allure. That amber perfume melted him.

“I’d be so happy to help.” She gripped Billy’s leather bomber and jerked him into a chair. He had a semi at this point. “Get comfy.”

Hell, the girl was plotting a murder with that smoldering

expression. Still, Billy was game because she was giving him attention. His tongue swept pink lips. Peachy skin glowing.

There was something off about Evie too. This sunken manner like her energy had been sapped. The slightest dark circles under brown eyes. Skirt Safari was barely three weeks ago. He removed his jacket when Mona reached for it to hang it with Max's and Susan's.

Dead boy walking.

Max snickered from her chair across the way. She and Susan sat with little floral capes, already getting their pampering. Evie moved Billy's hair and pulled a lilac cape around his neck.

"Ack!"

"Oh? Too tight. My bad." She snapped a button. "Put your head back. Into the sink now."

Billy thought to pray for mercy, tilted back into the porcelain. He asked for this. The sink went on. Ice.

"Too cold?"

"Nope." Teeth chattered. Evie had that devilish look still. Decided to make it warmer. Lifted the nozzle and hit his face.

And Billy took it. Sputtering.

"Oh, so sorry..." Her tongue clicked. Didn't even try to sound sincere.

"Just a little water. No big deal."

Her bottom lip pouted. She sprayed his face again. Billy snickered through the coughing, fists held the chair tight.

"You're fucking waterboarding me, Fenny." He'd spat, blinking rapidly.

"What?" Evie paused then kept spraying him as he tried to reply.

“You’re-”

“I’m, *what?*” She came off and Billy snorted before the water splashed again.

“*Ngh-ffff-*”

“Can’t hear you, Billy.” Evie caught Max losing it across the way.

The boy took all the torment like a champ so she let up. He didn’t even snap when she pulled his hair shampooing it.

“I like it rough, Angel.” Billy hissed at her fingers pulling so she sprayed him again. Made him buck like a mad feline. He seemed to almost love it. This was foreplay to him.

“Creep. Don’t pitch a tent in that cape.” Evie stuffed a towel in his face. Smiled cheerfully. All syrup. “We’re done, mommy.”

“Let’s see what I can do for these curls, Billy.” Mona let Claudia work on Susan while her new hire took over for Maxine. “I hope Evie gave you a good start.”

She certainly revved his motor, but he wasn't going to tell her mother that.

“So nice. I feel even more relaxed now.” Billy twitched a stressed smile. Earned himself a few good boy points.

Evie cracked a grin at him, arms crossing before she went back to reception. Unbelievable.

Mona had Billy chattering about his car and school and how he'd just turned eighteen in December. Life was coming his way. Evie took to doodling song lyrics in no order and tapped her pen. Mona either talked Billy into hair curlers or just started doing it. Which was another bout of amusement.

And Billy stared at Evie the entire time. Even when she made it a point to face away. Sat on the stool with her legs crossed, leaning forward to jot her little lyrics down. Susan swept her eyes between them.

Both relentlessly stubborn.

"Mona, I've been wanting to repay you back for the dinner this month. How about tomorrow? Our place this time." Came her voice when a hair dryer shut off.

"We'll bring the dessert." Fingers played with Billy's curls. Reminded him of his mother. Fluffed some life into them. He decided this salon was better than the places he used to go.

Music played, songs changing as time continued. Evie decided her luck couldn't get any worse when Carol's red hair appeared in her line of sight. Walking with her little friend group without Tommy. Likely headed to the nail place down the block.

Carol spotted Evie behind glass and whispered something that had her friends howling before they went.

"Bitches." Billy sauntered up behind her. Golden hair sparkling.

"As if you had nothing to do with that." Evie smacked her notebook shut. Sat straighter as he shook his locks out. Curls shining with lift. Like the sun just kissed them.

"How do I look?" One brow rose. Teasing.

"The same." *Gorgeous.*

"Lunch?"

"Already ate." Evie's lips pressed when she said that. They spoke out of earshot under the music. Not noticing the glances on them.

"Guess I'll still be seeing you for dinner tomorrow." Billy counted some bills out. Snatched a pen and scribbled a note on a single. Dropped the money on the counter and pushed the one he'd written on into her pocket. She lifted an arm and glared, but let him. "We'll do this again some time. The back and forth. I pull your hair and you pull mine."

"Unlikely."

"Hm. Invest in waterproof red lipstick. Don't they have waterproof makeup now? Looks better on you than on me." His voice dropped.

"Wow. Cocky now, are you?"

"I just think it'll take us a lot of tries to get to a bad kiss. Don't you, Evie?" He replied pointedly, leaning over to speak in that low baritone. Pure amber honey.

"I think you're in denial, Billy. Gotta put pride aside." Evie bit her tongue and turned away. Loathed the blush glittering her cheeks.

"Takes one to know. I'll wait for Max in the car. Need a smoke. See you around, Angel." Billy swayed off after grabbing his coat. Out into the cold.

Evie put his money in their register and plucked the dollar out.

"Sorry. -A shithead."

Billy had even gone out of his way to draw a little frowny face with a tear. Evie caught him looking at her from his car and rolled her eyes, stuffing the bill away.

Tried not to smile. Failed.

"Billy doesn't do this kind of thing." Max appeared a bit later. Glow and red. Vibrant. "Just...so you know."

"It shows." Evie sighed out her nose. Watched Max say bye to her mother since she was staying with Mona before hurrying out into the Camaro. One rev and it skidded off. Snow flurries falling in its wake.

"She seemed mad," Max had said in the car, "but, maybe less mad."

"It was a big fuck up. She'll be mad a long time."

"And that bothers you."

"No." Billy flicked his cigarette out the window. Watched his sister's lips press before he scoffed. "Max, I did something evil. You understand? Evie wants fuck all to do with me."

And he couldn't throw her from his thoughts.

“What did you do?” Max leaned in to press the subject. “Just tell me.”

The gist of it came out by the time they parked at Cherry Lane.

Max just blinked at him. Flared. Billy cut the engine and paused, glancing at her.

“Why do boys do this to girls?” She asked, fists clenched in her lap. Rigid and puffy. “I don’t understand. Are my friends going to be like you when they get older?”

“No, Max, they’re not. I’m a piece of shit.” His shoulders came up.

“And you didn’t have to be... Keep groveling, you owe Evie that much.” She slammed the door when she got out. Expected to get barked at and slowed because he made no move. Just flicked his lighter open and closed there. Blue eyes on the steering wheel.

Exhaling into the frost, Max came around the car and jerked Billy’s door open.

“You suck at this. She doesn’t want you to do this self-deprecating game where you play the asshole victim. She wants a real apology.”

“I don’t know what the fuck she wants me to say anymore.”

“Maybe you don’t have to say anything to her.” Max paused. “Those girls and people at school, they’re mean to her. Aren’t they? You’re the Keg King. Are you really going to let that happen?”

“They’re just fucking assholes, ignore them.”

“Easy for you to say being popular. What happened to Evie during the dance has been happening to her through all of high school. Don’t you see that? If you really cared, you’d do something to stop it.” The door shut on Billy before he could reply.

Max went up into the house, left him to stew on that until he followed her inside. Away from the snow and Evie’s penetrating eyes

that were beginning to haunt him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Tensions are just shooting all directions with these two dorks. Thank you all so much for reading! Feel free to chat below as always or hit me up on my writing blog, Alias-B

8. Because My Calendar Is Open

Notes for the Chapter:

New chapter!! Revenge plots, unlikely allies, and a romantic dip. TW: Hints of teen bullying and mentions of pica. Billy's anger gets scary for a hot sec.

“Wish it was warm enough to eat outside.” Evie grumbled. Picking crust off her sandwich.

Ignored Carol's cackling three tables away. All the clicking of cutlery on plastic trays grated worse.

“How was that dinner at Billy's?” Heather looked up from her lunch.

“Susan had to call and cancel. I guess she wasn't feeling well.” Evie frowned. Wondered if Neil liked her staying out late with Mona and her friends. “Rain check.”

Behind Heather, Steve Harrington was wandering with a tray. Looking lost as he always did this time. No longer friends with Tommy and giving Nancy and Jonathan some space.

“Steve.” Evie piped up, pressing her lips. “Want to sit with us?”

He blinked. Crossed.

“Yeah...that's cool.” He slid into the bench next to Evie. Plastered a little charm. “Ladies.”

“Hey.” Heather's smile brought pink into Steve's soft cheeks.

“Evie, you know Hargrove is staring at you, right?” Steve started to cut into his slab of meatloaf, gesturing with his chin. “What's the deal with that? He's been trying to use his laser eyes since school started again.”

Evie spotted Billy a couple tables behind Heather. Intent. He didn't

look away when their eyes met. Evie just shrugged.

"I don't know what you mean, he's just annoying. Forgot he even existed." Evie scooped up some mushy peas and gagged them down. Heather studied her.

"He's a little prick." She decided.

"He's a dumb guy."

"He's not a guy, Evie, he's a prick."

Steve snickered at them.

"You reject him or something? Seems like a persistent asshole." Steve went on.

"As if Billy Hargrove would ever be into me." Evie looked away. Said that before.

"Whatever. Billy and his penis don't deserve you." Heather got Steve choking on milk laughing. Some came out his nose. "Oh no!"

"Here." Evie was giggling too, pressing a napkin to her friend's mouth and nose. "Heather, go easy on him."

"So much for King Steve, right?" A laugh followed but it sounded weak. Evie only pressed her lips.

"Royalty is overrated. Steve is fine." She smiled a little for him. Met his dewy eyes and pulled away. When she faced Heather, Billy was gone. "Heather and I were hitting the movies after school. Want to go with us?"

"Like hang out?" Steve perked so Heather nodded too. All smiles. "Uh, yeah. I'd like that. I'll drive."

"Perfect. We do this thing where we show up and watch whatever is playing soon. Bad or not... Oh, shoot...I gotta hit the library, I forgot to return something." Heather winked and got up to dispose of her trash. Left Evie with the pretty boy.

"You ride your bike in, don't you?" Steve turned his head as Evie picked up her water. "It's winter."

"Seasons change, my boy." Evie sipped, beaming.

"I just wondered if maybe you wanted like a ride to school and back."

"Heather usually is able to grab me. The before and after school extracurriculars are starting to pile for her..." She blinked.

"You live on Cherry, you're not out of the way for me."

"I so am." Evie chuckled and shrugged.

"Just a ride, maybe you can help me graduate." Steve held out a hand. "Fair?"

"Sure." They shook on it. "Thanks."

"Well, well, well." Carol flipped her helmet of orange hair aside and settled palms flat on the table. "Fallen from grace and now sucking up to the ice queen. I hear pretty boys can thaw her though, Steve, so you might get lucky for once. Does Mr. Bowers even speak to other students, or are you just needy enough for the list?"

"Carol. I already know the answer," Steve touched his chest, "but, do you really have nowhere better to be?"

"Looks like Fenny gets around, huh?" Tommy curled an arm around his girl's shoulder. Flashed that crooked smile. "Just going down the list now."

Normally, Evie would have spoken up. Witty comeback. But, she just glared at the ugly cafeteria tiles.

"How about you get lost?" Steve continued. Evie's hands curled into her lap. The amusement from their friends just grew louder and she couldn't stand it. Anger burned white hot and a bark stopped them all.

"Hey." Billy crossed back in. Few tables stopped to see him

command. “Knock it off, let’s go.”

“But-”

“Just leave it the fuck alone, Carol. Yeah? This shit is done to death and I’m over it. You’re being really pathetic. Both of you. C’mon.” Billy flared up, head cocking. “Only gonna ask you idiots once, the fucking cackling is giving me a headache. Leave her alone from now on, unless you want a problem with me. Bye.”

He pointed toward the door. Not joking. A few students moved to go.

Carol and Tommy both seemed to sag and follow after them. Their friends at the table decided the fun was over and crossed out too.

Billy cast Evie one lingering stare, ignored Steve, and went the other direction. Shoved the door to go outside.

“Did...that just happen? What’s up with him, seriously?” Steve turned back to Evie staring at where Billy had disappeared too. Lips parted.

“I...I don’t know.” She asserted. “And I don’t care, I gotta...go.”

“You barely ate anything.”

“Filled up at breakfast, not much of an appetite.” Evie forced a chuckle. “See you in class?”

“Sure...” Steve pushed his hands into his pockets. Let her go.

** **

Billy didn’t appear again from all his smoke and stars. Never quipped about those almost heroics from the days before. But, his snapping kept Carol and her gaggle off of Evie completely.

Like magic.

More January snow fell with the weekend. Never ending frost with a perfect blanket of peace. Icicles shimmering on every house. The

whole street sparkled.

Evie bundled and slung a bag over one shoulder. Figured venturing into town was better than sitting in a freezing house contemplating what to swallow next.

She tried to slow. To stop. To let things pass. This habit was eating her right back.

Evie started to pass the Hargrove house and looked up to watch the new flurries fall. Too delicate upon her cheeks. Like confetti.

She thought of the intimate way Billy had touched her lips with two fingers to brush a piece away before kissing her. Again and again.

The thought bloomed unwanted roses up her cheeks.

She caught a glimmer on the sidewalk right in front of Billy's car and Neil's truck parked there. Couldn't stop herself from shiny things. Bent down and pulled her glove off to pluck something silver up. A chain. And a pendant came with as Evie held it out from her expression.

A Playboy charm.

Crouched there, she sighed into pure cold. Blinked and let her eyes focus on Billy's car beyond it. Quiet and undisturbed.

So, Evie thought.

Lips parted when she saw the passenger side door. Even with a few splatters of snow, words came into focus.

Carved crude and angry into the side.

Prick.

Bold, ugly letters.

Evie shot to her feet. Shuddering and alert like someone was watching.

“Oh, my god.” She puffed, cradling the chain to her chest.

By some twist of horrible fate, the front door beyond the porch opened.

Billy stepped out. Cool as a cucumber. Lighting a cigarette. Stunning in a brown, leather bomber.

Feet shuffled back. She stared at Billy with this clear look of horror when he spotted her.

“Photo will last longer, Angel, but I charge for them.” He quipped, massaging his front suggestively. Lighter flicking closed.

Billy hadn’t seen his car.

Evie felt adrenaline kick in when the bus passed behind her. Steps hurried up the sidewalk to get on it without glancing back. A hand covered her lips. Evie paid and sat down. Dared to peer back at Billy’s house.

He was standing between the vehicles. Eyes pointed on the craving.

And then he slowly lifted his blaring gaze to where she’d disappeared too.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Evie thought she might have a panic attack right there. Tried to catch her breath until the bus rolled onto Main Street before a hand tugged frantically to get off. She went into the first store she saw. Grocery store big enough to hide in. Attempted again to get her lungs working.

Maybe running wasn't the best idea, but staying to explain seemed impossible.

The charm left an imprint in her hand from clutching it so tight.

Billy thought she did that. *Fuck*. And he was going to fucking kill her.

Evie scurried around the aisles. Kept checking the windows for the furious, rumbling Camaro. Pulled a beanie lower and her hood up before creeping back outside to cross the street. Tucked curls aside.

She could have blamed Heather if the charm wasn't damning enough. Her friend had used the word *prick* a number of colorful times.

Brock Tannen was fucking with them both now.

"Shit, shit." Evie muttered. Few residents paced to get their own errands done. The rev of an engine shot sparks up Evie's soul. She whirled down an alleyway, figured he might just run her over.

"Fenny!" Billy skidded halfway down the path and curved. Lunged out of his car. "Get back here! You think I won't recognize that ass anywhere you stick it? What the fuck! C'mere!" His snarling echoed.

Evie was sprinting now, but Billy worked out and he was taller so he caught up easily. Two tight hands yanked her coat so hard, she skidded on slush and fell next to some stone steps. Hard thud planked her body.

Stars burst. A groan pushed from pink lips before eyes focused on Billy Hargrove about to breathe fire and lay waste to her.

She'd never seen such an expression on a boy before. Pure, burning fury and hate.

Wild like he wasn't really seeing her.

Scrambling, Evie had also never witnessed something so frightening. Billy's hands were on her shoulders. Pressing his steel weight down so he could snap his jaw. Starving.

"What the fuck! You fucking keyed my car! My fucking car, you *bitch?*" Profanities of all sizes and colors were spitting from his lips. Evie just looked shaken and terrified at him. Realized she wasn't talking so her brain tried to mash words together.

"I didn't! I didn't do it!" She barely spoke over his rage. Hands pushed at his chest with no hope to get him off.

For a moment, she wondered if he'd try to hit her. He just growled and yelled. Unleashing fury he might have pent up.

"Billy! Billy, it wasn't me!" Evie tried again. Brought her palm up so he could see the chain twisted around her fingers. "Tannen! Look! Just look, I didn't..."

Billy finally shut down. Went still to narrow on the charm, recognizing it.

The fingers twisted into her coat were hauled up by bigger hands and a taller figure.

"Hargrove, it's too early for this, Jesus Christ." Chief Hopper had parked his Blazer and was now smacking Billy into the side of it. He turned and noticed Evie pushing herself off the wet ground. "Evie Fenny? Are you okay?"

Wind blew through the alley.

"Yeah, I..." She saw handcuffs and Billy squirmed before she sprang up. "Wait a second. That wasn't..."

"Looked like this boy had you pinned down." Hopper was trying to get Billy to keep still. "A new low, kid."

"Get off me, you damn pig!"

"Lovely." Jim gruffed, sighing. "We'll talk about this at the station."

"Wait, we were...fooling around." Evie hurried and grasped Jim's arm. Backed off when his head whipped toward her in disbelief. "I fell and took him with me. It was an accident. Please don't take Billy away." Hands clasped to plead.

A curly head tilted toward her too. If Billy had issues with the police, Neil would snap him in half.

"Please, Chief, just let him go. This is a big misunderstanding. Billy and I will go home. Please." Evie tugged again and Hopper blinked a couple times.

“Just fooling around?” He looked to Billy, who was completely simmered again.

“Uh, yeah. I’m revved, Chief, just look at her.”

“Okay...” Jim cringed. “Just...get out of here and stay out of trouble, kid. Drive under the speed limit, yeah?”

“I love law, Chief Hopper.” Billy quipped. Hopper peered at Evie again so she smiled and grabbed Billy’s hand.

“We’ll be going now. Billy owes me a ride.” She tugged, still breathing heavier. The Chief got back into his car to go, head shaking. Teenagers.

Evie snatched from Billy and shoved him away the second the older man had gone.

“Don’t ever come at me like that again.” Her voice tremored lower. One finger poked his muscled torso. Billy only stared. “Never again.” She tossed the chain at his chest. “Your new best friend screwed you over. Not me. Eat that up, *prick*.”

Evie started walking again and saw a piece of cardboard duct taped over the nasty carving. Billy caught up with her.

“That shithead isn’t my friend. He framed you...not very well.” Billy let the chain dangle before his face. “He’s fucking dead. My dad’s gonna ream me when he sees the car. Shit... Fucking shit!”

Evie paused to peer back at him. Head in his hands, crouched over to curse. She slowed. A beat.

“Look, I...I know a garage that’ll help you out with a discount. My mom’s friends with the owner and his wife. Perks.” She stuffed her hands away and looked down at her clothing. “Shit, I’m soaked.”

“Never heard that before.” Billy joked, smirking. “Thanks...for keeping me out of cuffs.”

“You’re an asshole still.”

“Yeah.” He agreed, going to the car. “Get in.”

“Why?”

“Take me to the garage so I can get my shit fixed. See if I have enough for it.” Billy rubbed his eyes. “Fuck.”

“Only if I drive.” Evie crossed her arms. Billy did a double take. “I have my license.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes or I’ll walk.” Evie shot back until he tossed the keys at her to catch. Billy bitched about it, but slid into the passenger side. The engine revved so he hissed.

“Easy...”

“That’s rich.” Evie squealed off. Obeyed the speed limit. “Thought Tannen was your buddy.”

“I think I punched him after the dance. I was still kinda drunk.” Billy gave an agitated breath. Sunk into the seat. “Why’s he hate you so much?”

“Because I exist in this body with this brain and I breathe, it doesn’t matter.” Evie turned a corner. Avoided his stare. “I think he hates anything that isn’t him.”

“Well, Tannen hates us both. Framing you and fucking with my car.” Billy paused. Got sly. “So, how are we getting him back?”

“Revenge? No, not interested.”

“C’mon, Angel, live a little.”

Evie skidded to stop at a red light. Head snapping to see him.

“Yeah, I tried that with you already.” She seethed. Billy studied

her. "I'm taking you to the garage and I'm catching a bus home. My clothes are still damp, thanks for that."

"Brock's date was fourteen, did you know that? He's a piece of shit and he's asking for it. You don't have to like me, we can just hate the same person who hates us. Teach him a lesson."

"Any bright ideas?" Evie continued down the street. No answer. "Thought so."

"I'll think of something." Billy paused. "Tannen's got a cushy little life doesn't he? Perfect family. Girls lined up."

"He's dating the daughter of a pastor. Sweet cheerleader who goes to Bates. Cheating on her because she isn't putting out. But, she's good for the image and for his ritzy Ridgemon't family. Heather's parents run in a similar circle. She always has dirt."

"Yeah? What's Tannen like?"

"His car and his image." Evie parked. "Go in and drop my mom's name. The guy's sweet, he'll help you out." She tossed the keys in Billy's lap. "See you later."

"Wait." Billy hurried around the car as she got out. "Just, wait. Let's get back at him."

"I don't care as much as you do, Billy." Evie passed with snow falling into her long, spiraling curls.

"Sure you do, you're just pretending you don't." Billy snagged her wrist. "Evie. I am fucking sorry. About the shitty dance. About school. It's fucked and I don't blame you for being this upset."

The continued groveling made her smirk.

"Not upset." Evie crossed her arms.

"He flashed that money in my face and I just figured I could show you a good time and keep you out of it. But, the whole thing when I saw it...I really thought they weren't serious about the pool. I wanted out of the deal. I kissed you after midnight. It was still fucked. The

other girls, they... You know, I've been thinking about them too. We could get revenge for them. Shove it up Tannen's ass."

"Did you fake it?"

"Fake what?"

"All of it." Evie gathered the courage. "The...talking. The smiles. The laughter. Dancing with me. Why did you kiss me after midnight?"

"I just..." Billy shrugged hopelessly. Lashes fluttering. "I felt like it. I don't have to bullshit around you. You call me out when I do either way. I don't know. You kissed me first and I thought...I just wanted to kiss you. I asked you to a fucking motel."

"And I was gonna go with you." Evie shrugged. "But, you lied to get me there. I can't help but feel that bullshit laced all of it. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah." Billy sighed. Stood there against winter. Unafraid. "Fact remains, I didn't want anything else."

Evie gave a breath into the cool air.

Neither did I.

"Let's get your door fixed." Evie went around him to go into the shop. She did all the talking to a burly man with a hook prosthetic for one hand while Billy teetered on his feet behind her. "Give him a couple hours to work."

"Daddy'll miss you." Billy huffed, digging for a cigarette while his precious car was moved away. Evie gave him this scrunched look and shook her head, laughing.

"Well, see you around." Evie got the back of her jacket snatched and huffed for theatrics.

"Nice try, you think I can't follow you all over this town? Look, grabbing you was... I shouldn't have done that. I won't come at you like that again." Billy turned her, cigarette dangling from his lips.

“Tannen.”

“Your problem.”

“He’s gonna be your problem too, Evie.” Billy stood over her, plucking his smoke out to puff. “If you don’t help, I might run off and do something stupid.”

“All your life.” She cocked her head. Gave another sound of aggravation. “Just because I know I can’t outrun you. Let’s go. It’s too cold.” A hand tugged his jacket until he was walking next to her. Billy felt his stomach bubble with excitement. “There’s this place Heather and I like...up the block.”

They walked slushy sidewalks to the corner where a little cafe sat. Teens wandered a smoky, dim lit lounge. Evie pulled her coat, beanie, and gloves away to sit. Billy stole an ashtray and followed. Peering around at all the art and empty stage. Hippy sort of place, not like other hangout spots in Hawkins.

“The co-owned bakery next door supplies all their pastries.”

“Broke now.”

“I’m offering.” Evie decided. “Not cause I like you. I just don’t like to eat alone at a table.” Billy’s eyebrows lifted before he tapped his ashes.

“You pick.”

“Do you drink hot cocoa?” Evie watched him nod when a boy crossed over. “Jesse, hey.”

“Fen,” the boy grinned broader, “hi.” Year younger and going to Hill Valley. Family moved a town over but kept the location for their beloved cafe. “Marty was just asking if I’d seen you around Hawkins.”

“Yeah, let him know Heather and I said hi. First year of college any good?”

“He likes the Florida weather.” Jesse swept his mop of brown curls aside, a million piercings along his ear and eyebrow caught the light.

Broad boy who enjoyed football, painting, and the piano. Peered at Billy and blushed. "Who's your cute friend?"

"Down boy. This is Billy, he's having a day that only your hot chocolate and apple strudels can cure."

"Where'd you get your ink?" Billy eyed Jesse's decorated arms.

"City, not far. I'll write it down for you." A wink. Billy seemed to like the attention today. Jesse turned back to Evie. "My mom tried to dye her hair in the bathroom. Didn't go well so Mona will be seeing her this week."

"Ouch. Again?" Evie chuckled. "What color this time?"

"What supposed to be strawberry sky and it's...cotton candy pink. I liked it." He laughed. "Sprinkle of cinnamon on the cocoa?"

"You know me too well." Evie let him go off then faced Billy. "High School running back. Sweetheart. I dated his older brother. Briefly before the move."

"So, you guys still talk or...?" He faked disinterest and she snorted at the attempt.

"Not really. I mean, we ended fine, he's just a college kid now." Evie cracked a smile, narrowing. "But, my mom's friends with his mom."

"What mom doesn't Mona know? Figure she leads the network." Billy countered. Evie shrugged.

"Good point, she's a social nut."

"Speaking of, isn't that her?" Blue eyes turned out the frosted windows. Mona in a short dress, fitted chic coat, and tall platform heels that rode up her knees. Nancy Sinatra would be proud. Walking with a bunch of paper bags, headed back toward her shop. Men stopped to see her bounce. "Damn."

"Stop looking at my mom, perv." Evie reached for his jaw and turned it back toward her. Breath catching as she slipped away quicker. "Why'd Susan cancel on us?"

“Dad canceled. Not Susan. He just made her do the dirty work.” Billy explained, snuffing his cigarette out.

“He didn’t like her staying out with friends late?” Evie guessed. “What kind of husband doesn’t want his wife to have friends in a new place? I bet she’s lonely.”

“You lonely?”

“I have friends. Are you lonely with your fake fans?” Evie shot back, sitting up. He batted his lashes, undaunted.

“Dad doesn’t like anything except maybe his collection of belts and a full bottle.” Billy shrugged his jacket off. Played with his ring. Head turning, the little spike hanging from his ear caught the light outside.

Infuriating, how pretty he was not doing anything.

“Does he hit her too?”

“Too?” Billy snapped back in, leaning forward with his arms crossed. “What’s that mean?”

Evie only stared at him.

“Sorry.”

“No, I...” Billy cursed to himself. “You probably get a front row seat. You know, he didn’t start going at Susan until the move here. She’s learning though. Quickly. How to play dad’s game.”

“Does he go after Max?”

“No, he’s too distracted with me and I keep Max out of trouble. He will one day when she’s older.”

Evie looked at his hand and wondered about touching it. Billy seemed to feel it hang in the air so he sat back.

“Bowers ever hit you?”

“No, he doesn’t-” Evie caught herself with wide eyes. Got smaller.

“He’d never hit me.”

“So, you’re admitting it.” Billy leaned forth again. Even closer. Some instrumental and chatter covered their voices.

“No one will believe you.” She repeated, eyes on the table.

“No, probably not. Won’t tell even if I think it’s fucked.” He screwed his eyes at her. “How?”

“How’s it possible for someone gorgeous to get with a girl like me?” She sounded wounded.

“No, just...how?”

They paused when Jesse returned. A full plate of warm, golden pastries. Two steaming mugs. Evie tipped him with a sudden smile.

“Thanks, Jess.”

“Anytime. Don’t be a stranger.” He looked to Billy. “You too, got it? I wrote that address down. They love taking new people if you need ink. Come in here and...show it off.”

“I just might. Thanks.” Billy sparked with his usual charm as the boy went.

“You love to flirt.”

“I love to be desired, don’t you?” Billy stuffed the card away, peered at his mug before drinking. Evie followed. “So. We got time.”

“Why do you care?”

“I just do. I think you’re interesting, Evie. This town needs a blast of color and I found it.” Billy stared. “Think I’m gonna judge you?”

“Yeah.” Blunt.

“Well, I’m not. Not you.” He plucked up a little pastry when she didn’t. “Don’t let me eat this whole damn plate.” Evie scoffed, breathless and took one to chew. Licking sugar from her lips.

“Billy, why...why are you here with me still?” She narrowed again.

“Because,” he sparkled, “my calendar's open.”

Evie tried to look away. To laugh him off. Couldn't find the will and locked in.

“Well, I don't want to get into it here. So, let's just enjoy the heater and sweets.” Evie reached for another flaky pastry. Billy grabbed one too. They filled their bellies in silence. Eyes locking then averting ever so often.

“Let's get out of here. Walk.” Billy licked his thumb. Arms crossing to lean over and see her drink.

“You want me to spill badly.”

“I took you out and you had a shitty time, I don't do that. I want to make up for it.”

“You don't like the snow,” Evie ruffled her curls, “don't know how you're surviving it, Cali.”

Billy peered out the window. Let the glow bathe his face. Cool and almost iridescent. Brightening his eyes framed with those sinful lashes.

“You like winter?” He asked out of the blue.

“Actually, yeah. It's not so bad. Prefer fall. I like tucking in with a warm blanket and cocoa. I like the snow, things always feel...new after.” Evie felt a distance quell. He seemed to notice it too. Wistful and vast. “It covers up what came before.”

“Well, let's go walk in it.” Billy pushed up. “I'll meet you halfway and brave it.”

Evie stared at the table. Watched him start to go before she shoved her hat on. Got up and followed.

“If I just say that I forgive you, can we part ways?” Evie got in front of him outside. Flecks of snow tumbled into her hair. Melted on

strawberry cheeks. Billy was too many colors against white and grey. Ocean blues. Peaches. Cherries. Honey. All sun kissed freckles and golden hair.

“We could make a bet.” Billy stepped closer to curl a devilish smile.

“Another bet?” Her brow lifted. “No thanks, my track record with you and bets is zero.”

“No fun at all.” Billy puffed. “Evie, the way I see it, neither of us can leave the other alone.”

“That’s a you problem.”

“You know you can shake me and you’re not trying too hard, I think you’re just curious enough to stick around.” Billy cocked his head. “So, I’m just saying we should chase that. It was fucked up and...I am sorry. For you and those other girls. I say that you and I hang out long enough to get revenge on Tannen and then, I swear...cross my heart as fuck all...that I’ll leave you alone once that prick gets it. Only if you want me gone.”

“You tried this.”

“I didn’t mean it then.” He stuffed hands into his pockets and she exhaled out her nose. Shuffled on the slick sidewalk.

“But, you magically do now?”

“Maybe that’s what has us stuck, we want to do something about it.”

“You swear?”

“Every damn day.” Cheeky shit.

Evie’s eyes squinted at him. Sized him up.

“I just...I don’t forgive you.”

“I can live with that,” he said, “for now. I haven’t earned shit. I’ll make it up to you.”

Promises. Promises.

"I don't," Evie tried again to disengage, "I don't think you can."

"C'mon." Billy slid in front of her when she turned. Got lush. "Evie."

"Let's just not make this harder than it needs to be." Her hands lifted. Evie went around him and Billy's arms went out aimlessly.

"What would your Mr. Darcy do to make you feel better?"

"What?" Evie spun on her heel, almost laughing. Billy peered away.

"I got his name right. How'd he make you feel better? Listen, Evie...I deserve the cold shoulder. I do. It fucking..." Billy sucked in air and came to her at the corner. "I'll level with you. I've been beating the shit out of myself for what happened and I deserve that. Does that help you? I can't even get it up...you know what I'm saying? I liked it. Being there with you and I can't change what happened after."

"Ick. I wish I didn't know what you mean." Her face screwed up. A beat to break for laughter. "Is this really *that* important to you?" Billy got close with those wandering eyes.

"Yes... It really fucking is." He hissed lower. "Truth is, I even want more of those signature bad kisses we love to share. If you can still call them that, Angel."

Evie huffed. Almost aggravated. Not really. Stepped back to look him up and down.

"There's one thing you might be able to do to make me feel better." She crossed her arms. Brought on hands up to tap her chin in thought.

"And?" Billy gasped out.

"One question." She rounded him, eyes wandered to scrutinize. "Do you still have that white button up?"

Billy turned his head, earring dangling before he narrowed.

“Uh, yeah....” He looked a little apprehensive when she smiled fuller. Sly.

“We can work with that.”

** ** *

Three knocks and Heather Holloway was blinking her doe eyes at an odd pair.

“What’s he doing here?” She pulled at Evie’s arm to get between them. “What did I tell you, Hargrove?”

“Billy’s trying to make amends, Heath.” Evie said flatter. They stood before her huge mansion on Loch Nora. “Are your parents or the housekeeper around?”

“Not today.” Heather was still all daggers at Billy. “We don’t need Billy’s amends. He’s done enough.”

“There’s a bigger asshole to be worrying about.” Billy spoke. “Tannen.”

“Your buddy? I’m not so sure.”

“No, he...has a point. But, we’re not here to discuss that. Yet.” Evie blinked. Smiled. “Can we use your pool?”

Heather looked confused. The curls piled up onto her head bounced a little. No makeup. Lazy sweater dress.

“Why?”

“It’s indoors and heated.”

“Not heated right now.”

“Even better.” Evie beamed when Billy’s face dropped. “Sidebar, just us girls.”

Billy hung out on the snowy steps while they went just in the door.

There was a great deal of snickering before Heather returned biting her cheek. Fully amused.

“You can come in. Shoes off.”

Billy stepped inside to obey, looking around.

“Jesus, Holloway, this place... Is daddy the mayor?”

“He runs the paper.”

“Explains a lot.” Billy grumbled as her head snapped at him. “Easy. Not here to fight. Just...acting out Evie’s whatever Darcy fantasy to make her forgive me.”

“Never said I would forgive you.” She noted down the hall.

“This won’t hurt my chances.” Billy was stepping out of his shoes. Evie looped her arm into Heather’s.

“This way.”

He walked slower behind them to observe the place. Cheesy family portraits galore. Too many vases with fake flowers. Floral wallpaper. Rich people.

“So, what the hell brought you two back together?” Heather had asked.

“Not together.” Evie piped quicker. “Tannen keyed Billy’s car, framed me for it. I sorta helped him get it fixed.”

“He, *what?* ” Heather paused, opening a textured glass door.

“Yeah, big mess. Tannen’s not quitting.” Evie picked up as they went into the pool room. Odd to be in here while frost covered the back windows.

“Probably cause I punched him.”

Heather snorted at that, stepped on a button to bring the cover rolling back over the illuminated fresh water.

“You sure this is what your dream freak would do?”

“So, sure. Don’t forget your line.” Evie flicked a piece of paper she’d written on at his chest. Billy griped when Heather laughed at him trying to get out of his coat and jeans. White shirt and grey briefs. Evie peered at his muscled thighs and looked up at the ceiling.

Whew.

“You can look, ladies.” A sleazy grin bloomed. “You’re both lucky I wore underwear today.”

“Gross.” Heather came around the pool to her friend.

“Well, do your thing, William.” Evie giggled, gesturing. “Or should I say: *Fitzwilliam*.”

“How’d a guy with that name not get his fucking ass kicked? Instead, he’s drowning in pussy, I don’t get it.” Billy stepped into the water. Bitched about the cold and sauntered to the center holding his paper up. Soaked his shirt through.

“This isn’t even in the book.” Heather had whispered so Evie hushed her.

“Yeah, duh, but...Billy doesn’t know that. Look how hard he’s trying. It’s almost cute. Almost.” She covered her mouth. “Plus, I dreamed about this once, let a girl live here. It can happen one day.”

“Is he like...really trying?”

“Starting to think he is. Won’t leave me alone and he...I’m not exactly running either anymore.” Evie peered at Billy turning around. Voice rose. “You look great.”

“Bite me.” He dunked while holding one hand up to keep the line from getting wet. Came up ruffling his curls like some ethereal merman. Still stunning. White shirt clinging to his rock hard chest. Evie bit her lip with hooded eyes and missed Heather watching her face.

“Say the line!” She called then. Billy rolled his eyes with the longest huff he could muster.

“In vain I have-”

“With a little life, Billy!” Heather laughed at him there. Billy sucked in to pout. Water sloshing all over to prune his fingers. Hair and face dripping. Eyelashes clumped.

“In vain!” He just said it louder. Slower. *“I have struggled!”*

Evie and Heather had to kneel down because they were laughing so hard. Clinging together on the tiles.

“Keep going!” Evie waved her hand and tried to breathe. Billy groaned, eyes rolling.

“It will not do...” He’d already gotten water smudging the page. *“My feelings will not be...regressed?”*

“Repressed!” Came the correction. Billy shot the rest out in one swift breath.

“You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you!”

“How, what?” Evie was all giggles.

“How! Ardently! I admire! And love you!” He played a total smart ass. Smoldered. Broke. “Can I be done now? My balls are getting kinda high in here.”

Evie cackled comically, holding her stomach and rolling before she waved a hand.

“Yeah, yeah, you can get out. Oh, god. I can't...” She wiped her eyes and heard splashing. Scrambled because Billy was marching toward her sopping wet. Heather skidded to get away before Billy dove on Evie and shook himself out like a mad dog. Spraying her with water. “Billy! No!”

“Billy, yes!” He pushed her shoulders down and ignored the slaps at his chest.

They both were laughing now. Loudly. Almost free. Almost forgetting.

Heather grabbed a stack of towels and paused to see. Billy's infectious grin and Evie Fenny so lost in it that nothing else mattered.

Evie caught her friend's confused expression and shoved Billy off.

"Okay, okay, you're done." Evie shot up. Cheeks rosy. "Uh, bathroom." She got a towel from Heather's arm and jogged away. Faster than she meant. Billy pulled up to his knees so Heather padded toward him.

"What are you doing?"

"Fuck if I know at this point." Billy felt her drop a towel over his back. Pushed to his feet to see her. "Thanks."

"Are you actually trying here or are you going to hurt my friend again?"

Billy ruffled his hair and wiped his face. Holding the towel over broad shoulders.

"Listen, only thing I know for sure is I don't ever want to hurt Evie again." Billy stopped after that to let it sink in. "You know her best, what the fuck else can I do here?"

Heather's lips turned up. Spread to show teeth.

"You want to know what Evie likes." Tables turning.

"I know some stuff. Give me some more to work with. And don't lie, we played that game."

Heather exhaled to study him.

"Just because you seem to be trying and that's the hardest my friend has laughed in awhile." Heather peered at the door. "Evie's a hopeless romantic even if she hides it. A regular dreaming Cinderella. She likes people unafraid to show how they feel about her and

anything made of chocolate..."

"That checks out, I can work with it."

"That dance was cruel. You're lucky she's even allowing you the gift of embarrassing yourself in her presence."

"Noted." Billy peeled his shirt off and wrapped the towel around his waist. "I have a change of clothes in my car. Will it be weird if I jet out in this and my boots?"

"Ahhh, give me your keys. I'll find it." They paused to step away from each other when Evie returned. Towel bunched to her chest. Eyes flicking between them. Avoiding Billy's damp chest rising and falling, his saint chain glittering and stuck to skin.

"So, this thing about Tannen. Oof. I have an idea." Evie cleared her throat.

"Ohh, look at Miss Naughty Evangeline." Billy mocked with a southern twang. "Getting into the spirit. Why, now?"

"Because my calendar is open." She cocked her head up. Looked wildly pretty there with her devious pride. "Does Tommy still have Bubbles' number?"

Billy flashed a smirk. Let it illuminate his face until she matched it. Heather wondered about offering them a room.

"Angel, I'm really liking the way you think."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys for reading this one!!! Chat with me below as always or on my tumblr, Alias-B :D

9. Everything Is Blue

Notes for the Chapter:

Making some good headway with this fic so new chapter!! Revenge is a dish best served cold. Forgiveness is warm. Billy and Evie make some more progress. TW: Student/teacher relationship. Sexual refs. Abuse warning. Gaslighting.

“How much did she want?” Heather asked, crossing into the bedroom with a giant bowl of popcorn.

“She heard my voice and said she’d do it for free after Billy gave her two hundred that night. I think we should still give her something.” Evie was sitting on Heather’s bed so her friend joined. Billy leaned back in the desk chair across the way, eyes flickering all over Heather’s royal bedchamber.

“Told you I gave the money away.” He muttered.

“Where did the rest go? You got three hundred.” Popcorn crunched.

He looked down with this somber shrug.

“I gave Brock’s date a ride home. She was waiting for a taxi and, I don’t know, she looked scared.”

“His fourteen year old date.” Evie remarked. Poor girl. Probably took her just because he could get away with it.

“What!” Heather almost dropped the entire bowl. “What a disgusting-”

“Yeah.” Evie shook her head.

“I gave her the rest, felt like shit.” Billy finished, eyes meeting Evie’s when he looked up. She peered aside in a flash.

“So, Brock goes to church every Sunday if you can believe it with his parents and girlfriend. Her folks too since her dad’s the pastor.

Usually gets out just after noon. People linger outside, you know, to catch up. I think that's when you want to move in on the guy. Right in front of everyone before he can run off with his dick friends." Heather offered the bowl to Evie so she could munch on some.

"It'll work. Bubbles was all too excited to play actress." Evie smiled, cocking her head so Billy would cross to eat with them. He sat on the end of the bed. Peaked at Heather before grabbing some popcorn.

"Tommy didn't question why I asked for her number, he's not a fan of Brock either anymore." Billy licked his thumb. "Apparently, they figured he paid her and he got disqualified last minute. He gave Bubbles thirty just to show up so he's broke now."

"Tommy and Carol hate what you hate." Heather rolled her eyes.

"That too." Billy gestured and grabbed more popcorn, chewing. Weird to be sitting around like they were something close to friends. Revenge brought people together.

"If he sees us, he'll know something's up." Evie spoke. "I don't think Tannen sticks around after church though. Maybe we need someone in his circle to distract him long enough for Bubbles to make her move once everyone is out in the open. He'll definitely run the second he sees her show up. She told me the outfit she was going to wear. Whew, it'll be something."

"Might be weird if I show up. I mean, our parents run in the same groups and they get along...but I make it obvious I hate him."

"Turn him down a lot?" Billy pulled at his tee.

"Once a week, at least." Heather reclined to think.

"Who else do we know that's rich and unsuspecting?" Evie set the bowl aside, glancing around at Heather's walls covered in cut out magazines. They looked at each at the same time.

"I got it!"

Both girls peered at Billy's confused face before he appeared disgusted.

“Oh, no. Not him.”

“Time for you two to suck it up and get along.” Evie got up to grab Heather’s phone. “I think I remember his number.”

“...How’s that?” Billy’s interest piqued.

“He’s been a gentleman and giving Evie rides to school when I can’t.” Heather saw Billy’s brow twitch at that. Smiled wider.

“Steve, hey.” Evie said into the phone. “Sorry, I’m calling from Heather’s. I wanted to ask a favor, can you meet us here at her place?” A beat before she laughed. “Yeah, it’s top secret.” Evie bit her lip and Billy huffed to himself. “Sure, see you in five.”

She hung up.

“On the way.”

“I’m still hungry, let’s order Chinese.” Heather perked up. “I know what you like, Eve. Billy will get what I order and like it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Be back. My folks left money on the fridge.” She sat up to go. “We’ll feast. It’s a possible last supper.”

“Extra spicy, please.” Evie grinned as Heather walked out. Leaving her and Billy alone there. Slowly, she came back to sit on the bed. “So.”

“You seem more excited about the revenge than I am now.” He leaned in to catch her eyes.

“Might be nice to see that asshole fall apart for ten seconds.” She shrugged, legs crossing to settle her hands in her lap.

“Hey,” Billy uttered even softer, one leg on the bed, “you’re still here with me.”

Eyes panned to meet.

“I am.” Evie almost seemed to realize it too.

“Why’s that?” A dry curl fell into his face. Billy searched her and Evie didn’t peer away.

“Already told you, my calendar’s open too.” Evie looked fluttered at him. Thought of confetti falling when Billy curved toward her. One hand pressed on the bed and Evie turned her head last minute.

“Hey, he got here quick. Food’s on the...way.” Heather paused with Steve Harrington behind her. Billy and Evie shot back from each other.

“Him?” Steve had flared, pushing his initial confusion aside. “Hell no.”

“Round two, Harrington?” Billy stood up. Revved.

“I am not sitting in a room with this asshole.” Steve shot back.

“Easy, easy. Let us explain.” Heather touched Steve’s chest.

Explaining didn’t help because Steve pounced on Billy before they’d even gotten to the revenge part. Knocked the broad boy off the bed into the carpet.

“Man, you’re sick!”

Billy was snarling under him. Not actually moving to hit back when Steve’s fist cocked.

“Stop it!” Evie grabbed Steve’s arm to pull him off. “Hey! We’re here to get Tannen back! Steve!”

He paused to look at her. Straddling Billy with one hand clutching his tee. Got shoved off. Heather rushed to pull Steve up with Evie. Billy stumbled backwards to his feet after.

“Trying to make it right.” He heaved out, palm smoothing his shirt.

“I spent a night in the fucking hospital because of you,” Steve seethed, “but bringing Evie into that shit? You had no right.”

"Not asking for forgiveness, I'm just--"

"You should be on your fucking knees begging her for it!" Steve burst out. Evie touched his shoulder again.

"Look, I haven't...forgiven it."

"No, he's right. Evie." Billy sunk to his knees. The saturated colors of him glimmering there. Evie's brow jumped as he grabbed her hand. "I'm on my knees in front of Heather...and Heather's acquaintance."

Steve went flat.

"Asking forgiveness. I haven't earned it, but I'll stay here and beg for it." Billy's low baritone shook her knees. Big, bright eyes that melted her down. "Please, Evangeline."

"Jesus Christ." Steve's arms crossed, eyes rolling. Heather snickered to herself and Evie gave that usual scrunching look. The one that made Billy smile.

"Easy, boy. On your feet."

"As you wish." A smirk danced and Billy rose. Evie had to take a breath and compose herself, turning aside. Billy still had her hand so she snatched it to function again.

"I'm not letting him off. But, Tannen manipulated us both and I see that. I'm doing this for the other girls, he needs to be taken down a peg. Ignore Billy and his camp while we do this." Evie reasoned, meeting Steve's eyes. Shoulders falling. "You can help us get him back."

Steve looked between her and Billy.

"Okay." He sighed. "Okay. I'll help you out. What did you need me to do?"

"We might need some of that Keg King flare back." Evie nudged him.

Steve laughed at that. A small sound as he scratched the back of his

head.

“Might be able to fake it.”

** ** *

A plan was set. Strange still to be sitting around a diner table the next day with this group. Drinking cold beverages in the winter. Almost friends. Big question mark. Unlikely allies. Heather drove them out because her car was the least suspecting.

“How’re we doing on time?” Evie leaned over to see Billy’s wrist. Sipped a chocolate milkshake because she had a craving and plucked the shiny cherry up to put it between her teeth.

He was too busy watching that to tell time. Her tongue sliding over the juicy, artificial red of the fruit before she plucked the stem to chew.

“Hey, I’m just gonna guess that’s your friend.” Steve cocked his perfectly styled head in the direction of the window. Bubbles lingered there, unsure if she should come in. Coat pulled close over her dress and tights. Heavy makeup illuminated her entire face. Evie hopped up with a smile.

“Just in time.” She clicked out to grab the older woman’s hand and pull her inside. “I ordered you some fries, wanted you to eat something.” A basket full of hot gold was set down. Billy scooted over a chair so Bubbles could sit, smashing her cigarette out.

“You brought a cute friend, sweetie pie.” Came the happy rasp.

Billy lifted his head to beam and sunk when he saw her instead pinching Steve’s cheeks pink. Heather covered her lips giggling, but Steve liked it because for once, Billy wasn’t getting the attention.

“So, you wanna get this guy bad, huh?” Bubbles was reaching for the ketchup to feed herself. “Least Tommy was nice to me, not handsy like the others there.”

“Brock’s reputation is everything. We embarrass him in front of his people, that’ll burn. Really play it up.” Evie crossed her arms over the

table.

“Oh, I know exactly what to do. Gimme a ring if it works. We’ll all want to disappear quick after. My car’s around back. Seemed like a fun gig. I always wanted to be an actress.” Bubbles gestured with a fry and bit into it.

“Here’s for helping us. Means a lot strangely.” Heather offered a couple bills.

“I like you kids. Sticking it to the man as they say.” A shrug followed. “I saw that man’s date. She looked like my daughter. We don’t speak anymore. Happy to help knock an asshole off the saddle.”

“Tannen’s eighteenth birthday was last week. They had this massive party at his dad’s biggest casino. Glad my parents already had plans or they would have made an appearance.” Heather made a face. “His girlfriend’s sweet, maybe she’ll dump his ass finally.”

“Almost showtime,” Steve perked, “look across the street.”

Bodies in their Sunday best. Rich folk meandering around the front doors. Expensive cars crossing.

“You’re up, Steve. Go bump into an old rival. Shoot the shit.” Evie gestured. “Bubbles will follow your cue. Get out of there once she’s close.”

“I hope your boy is ready for this.” Bubbles stood while Steve chuckled on the way out, fluffing his hair. Her bracelets and necklaces clicked together. Hands adjusting her bra crudely. A wink and she strutted out too.

“Let’s get better seats, ladies.” Billy lit a quick cigarette. Made his way out before Heather swiped it to puff too. Billy didn’t fight her on that. Evie trailed behind them. Eyes on the pastel crowds. Men in khaki and women playing a game of ‘my obnoxiously decorated hat is better than yours.

Frozen streets that made the bright colors even more annoying.

The trio hid around a building across the way. Leaning into a fire escape. Saw Steve swaggering like he was out for a Sunday stroll in the rich area of this town.

“Hey, Tannen, that you? Long time no see, man.” Steve cocked his head to flash that winning smile.

Brock covered his disinterest with one that matched.

“Stevie boy. Didn’t know you still hung around these parts.”

“Where else would I get my hair products?” Fingers swept his voluminous mane.

“Not like Hawkins has a lot to offer, I guess. I hear they’re building a fancy mall.”

“Should give us something to do this summer.” Steve shrugged.

“I missed my shot at you in those last few games.” Brock’s arms crossed. He touched his chest where the silver charm used to sit.

“Ah, yeah. Wasn’t for me anymore.” Steve’s brow quirked. Tannen’s girlfriend and his parents weren’t far behind. Making nice with the pastor.

“Hargrove said something similar. True about you guys?”

“Yeah, I heard some wild stuff about you though. Some tiff the football players like to reenact with that girl. Pretty one. You on the floor wailing, the details escaped me.” Steve laughed for effect and Brock joined him. Artificial overlapping sounds. “Well, so great to catch up.”

“Say hi to your old man for us. I know he’s busy with work and his secretary.” Brock’s lips lifted in an empty fashion. “Love to catch up with the folks. Especially when those college letters come in. We’ll be having a party or two to celebrate me getting into Stanford. Where all did you apply again?”

Steve’s smile faltered.

“*Pshh*. So many places.” Steve patted his back. “See you around, man. I’ll let our football team know I ran into you. You’re their favorite subject.”

“Right.” Brock narrowed as Steve went around him. Tried to puff his chest out and intimidate. “Yeah, why don’t you make like a tree, and get out of here?”

Steve hitched this breathless laugh and caught himself. *Jesus fucking Christ*. Instead he winked with a finger gun.

“I’m gonna do just that, Tannen. Don’t ever change, ya hear?”

He went into the crowd, leaving Brock to feel great about himself.

The prick didn’t hear the peppy clicking.

Ruby red curtains parted somewhere. An overture bloomed. Show time.

“Brock, baby! It is you? Hey-a, honey pie.” Bubbles opened her animal print jacket to flash a bright pink ruched mini dress. “You didn’t forget about me, did ja? I can barely walk.”

She grabbed his face in front of everyone. Smacked a Barbie pink kiss into his mouth. Moaned.

“Oh, baby, I had such a great time last night. You’re an animal.”

Across the way, Evie was leaning into Heather to laugh. Barely able to stay upright. Brock reached into his mouth and pulled a wad of chewing gum out.

He hadn’t been chewing it a moment ago.

Frantic hands wiped his lips off.

“Evie, your new friend is my hero.” Heather cackled. Smacking at Steve’s chest when he appeared behind them. Bubbles was talking animatedly. Clinging as Brock tried to push her off and explain to his family behind him.

“Oh, his girlfriend’s about to blow. Look at her face. I feel almost bad now.” Evie shifted back to touch Billy’s arm. Blue eyes turned to see her nails. Painted a fresh rose red.

As if he felt it, Brock’s head snapped in their direction.

They all ducked behind a dumpster. Evie pressed into Billy’s side.

“He see us?” Heather muttered.

A commotion built as Bubbles flashed her wiles and clicked off. Practically skipping. Leaving Brock in a pastel lion’s den. Jesus himself wasn’t coming to save him.

“Don’t feel bad. It’s open season and Tannen’s not winter surviving material.” Billy remarked, peeking again. “Look at their parents. Fuck.”

“We should jet, this guy’s about to explode.” Steve pulled them to stay down and race toward the other end of the alleyway. “The gum was genius.”

“I think his mom fainted into the pastor.” Heather laughed, unlocking her car.

“Let’s get out of here.” Evie stole the passenger seat, leaving Steve and Billy to glare at each other in back. “Let’s see him explain his way out of that.” She waved to Bubbles appearing down the block.

“You guys want to hit up a movie or something? There’s no way I’m going to sit at home after that.” Heather turned the key so they could go. Evie looked around. Smiled genuinely.

“Actually, that sounds great. I’d kill for some sour patch kids.” She was mid turn to see the boys before Steve jumped to attention. Eyes wide at something beyond the front windshield.

“Guys! Problem.” He reeled to point. A sleek black car screeched around the corner. Not bothered by the cold in his fury, Brock clicked the roof to come down and stood. Shouted something unintelligible.

“Ah, shit. Heather, go!” Evie gestured until their little silver car

skidded to turn down the street. "Drive." There was some yelling in the backseat as Billy was tossed into Steve. Having not put his seat belt on.

"Ack, get off me, you damn brick..." Steve shoved the puffing boy away. Forced Billy into the seat and pulled his belt over. Got smacked off so Billy could click it in.

"He's following, Heather!"

"I'm trying! I'm not prepared for a race today." She peeled out through an alley back to the road. "I'm not getting pulled over for this asshole!" Her cheeks flushed red like a pair of cherries. Whipping around the next corner with Tannen in hot pursuit, probably freezing because his roof was still down.

"Hey, hey, there!" Billy leaned in to grasp Heather's seat.

"I'm not gonna make that." Heather panicked at a soil truck backing up toward a garden being constructed. Ready to block the way.

"Wanna bet? Punch it." He gripped tight as Heather's poor car revved forth. Weaving between vehicles and behind the beeping truck. Evie idly grabbed Billy's arm turning to see Brock on their tail.

No way he was going to make it.

Heather hit the brake to stop at the next red light. They all whirled to see him. Chickening out, Tannen's car swerved to a hard stop. Bumping into the back of a rickety truck on its side. Scratching paint and denting metal in.

"Holy shit." Steve gasped out. "Are we dead?"

Brock was still raging at them when the back of the truck burst open. Sending a pile of filth into his open expensive car. Billy about howled. The upset teen was buried until he had to spit it out of his mouth. Profanities whirling as the driver came around to scold him aimlessly.

"That's...manure..." Evie realized. More laughter echoed through

the car. Heather turned back to follow traffic off. "We are dead, aren't we?"

"We'll just look out for the jerk. He's got brain cells in the negative." Heather had replied, reaching to turn her Madonna tape on. Billy sat back with a groan.

"Oh, I love this one." Steve spoke over him, earning a look. "With Brock in deep shit...literally, his dad will be on him. The team's gonna love this one."

They drove from the city. Left Brock Tannen to stew in his own mess.

"Did you see his face when he pulled that gum from his mouth?" Evie chattered still. "His parents are gonna have him on lock down. No credit cards. No dates. Nothing. It's beautiful."

"You're hot when you're plotting someone's downfall and reaping the benefits." Billy scooted to lean between the seats.

"Ugh, sit back." Heather grimaced, switching lanes. Billy peered at Evie's profile and reclined. "Movie offer is off, we almost died."

"You guys think Tannen is scrubbing himself of shit right now?" Steve piped up. Billy actually gave a snort at his rival. Faces went flat as they glanced at each other.

"Might as well throw the damn car away." He'd added. Steve smirked a little and stifled it. This is the guy who busted his face open a couple months ago.

"Probably trying to explain himself as we speak. I hope he likes being single." Evie played with the zipper on her jacket. "Four of us didn't make a half bad team."

"Admit it, I'm growing on you. I pressed you into this, Angel." Billy got sly. Stared and knew she felt his eyes. Another laugh with an inch of sarcasm.

"Hard pass. I'm the evil genius here."

** ** *

Word spread about Brock Tannen's mishap in front of the holy father. His retaliation hadn't come, being in trouble with his rich parents. No one knew about the four who kick started it. But, the legend would live on.

Evie had more glowing news. She'd made it two weeks without eating foreign objects. There wasn't an empty feeling, not yet.

Maybe it was an odd phase. And she could stop.

Because she was in control and could stop whenever she wanted. This wasn't a problem.

February started off even colder than January. All the snow that melted was back with a vengeance. Even the ponds and lakes in the area froze over. Stilled in wait.

"Your 18th birthday is at the end of this month." Fredrick spoke while he set a plate down. Cheese and mushroom pasta. Evie thanked him quietly. Bowers seemed happier about the upcoming festivities than she did.

"Mom's already planning a surprise party I'm not supposed to know about." A giggle followed. Secret date Friday night, first day of the welcomed midwinter break. Evie wore a pretty dress with something lace underneath.

"I just wondered if you considered your options." He even poured her white wine. Tall glass.

"Options?" A fire crackled in the living room. Hard sounds she felt in her bones somehow.

"You and I." Fredrick went on. "If you wanted to go. Start our lives that we talked about. These dreams we had for months, we talked and now...it just feels so close."

Evie almost dropped her fork. Saw his eyes dip to see.

"Sorry, it's sudden. Ah, I can't drop out of high school, you know.

Didn't we always talk about how important my education was?" She paused quicker. "But, I thought about it. Us."

That was a lie. Not while Billy Hargrove was batting his lashes at her locker every day. Snapping at anyone who dared to speak down to her. Groveling. Joking like they might be friends. Flirting endlessly. Billy and those iridescent eyes ruining her with their glitter.

This game they played where she hid smiles until he walked away.

"No, you're right. It was foolish that I even pressed it. I shouldn't hope for you to...ah, well." He only smiled. "This summer. I could relocate and you could come with me. You'd like to get away, wouldn't you?"

"My mom and I have all these plans to get my music out."

"You can still sing your songs with me, Evie. You know, your mother wouldn't understand us if you came with me. I think it would be best for some distance. She'd have time to come around to the idea. Understand that you're happy with me. You are happy with me, aren't you?"

"Of course, I am. You put me back together."

Bowers loved that and sipped some wine. Evie stared at her plate and felt something well that took her appetite away.

"I love you," he professed, "I will marry you. Do this right. But, I've waited quite a long time, Evie. I hope you understand that."

She brought her hand up to her cheek in a motion like she was comforting a baby. Something she'd picked up since eating these things she shouldn't have.

"I do. I..."

"And you're always saying your mother doesn't understand. She keeps things from you. I just hate to see her hurting you. Neglecting you. You deserve so much better." Fredrick shook his head. Sighed like it was truly unfortunate.

Poor Evie with no one. No one, but him.

"She tries, she's just hurting after the divorce. She's not good at..."

"It feels like she doesn't even want you some days, isn't that what you said?"

"I was just mad at her over it all. We don't really fight." Her protest came out weak.

"Your father can't even be bothered to call his amazing daughter. Can't man up and explain. It breaks my heart."

"My dad...loves me." Evie said a little snippier than intended. Trying to convince herself too. Jack Fenny was always holding her. Kissing her forehead and rubbing her back. Protecting her from thunder storms. Evie sighed and blurted something else. "I kissed someone else."

"What?" Bowers paused, lowering his fork.

"A boy. Well, he kissed me."

"I didn't think you were that kind of girl." Fredrick offered that sweetly.

"He's been a real jerk and I think he was just playing with me. But, now I think he was really trying to make it up to me."

"He forced you?"

"No, I kissed back and I didn't tell you because it didn't mean anything. It didn't." She told herself that once a day thinking about it.

Billy's moans into ruby gemstone lips. His hands under her shirt. Hot.

"Evie. It's fine. You're allowed to have those teenage experiences. Frankly, I've told you to be open. It'll help us go unnoticed." A beat. "Did you sleep with this person?"

"No."

"Do you want to?"

"No! Never." She laughed, eyes elsewhere as if she'd also never thought of it.

As if she didn't think about Billy's fingers and his tongue and how he'd devour her. How he'd spell the word *Angel* between her spread thighs.

How wet it made her to consider it while she sat at the table with the god damn teacher she was fucking.

"I won't be upset if you do." Fredrick caught her eyes again. The pupils blew.

"No, I'm with you. It's you and I. Like we planned." She shook her head. A grin followed Fredrick's lips. Pride. "We can talk about summer, I just think...we should do it carefully."

"You're right. I won't push you. Can't blame me for wanting you, Evie. You're like a drug." His tone was more so unsettling.

She blushed there. Drank her full glass of wine down. Head spinning. Stood to cross and plucked up his glass to down it too. Fredrick watched. Pleased. Enchanted.

Then, she leaned down to kiss him. Hands on his face. Edging into his lap to tug so he'd take her to bed.

Bowers forgot his meal was there. Got up still kissing her to lead them off.

"I want you to fuck me." She asked like a grown woman. Lashes fluttering and flushed from the wine sloshing in her belly. His thumb pushed into her teeth. Faces close.

"Really asking for it, huh?"

One hard shove sent her into the bed. Evie felt drunk finally, wobbling to turn with her fingers smoothing over the cotton blankets. A neutral expression crossed her face. Eyes drew to an decorative plant in the corner.

It badly needed water. Once shiny green leaves drooped a dry brown. Poor thing.

Evie couldn't stop thinking about it.

Poor thing.

Weight shifted and he was over her. Whispering naughty things.

His shadow stretched until she was lost to it.

** ** *

Evie was home just before dark. Sore and holding her coat close. Walking down Cherry Lane, a car hood smacked shut. Billy peered up at her there, wiping his deft hands on a rag.

“Too cold to be working on your car.”

“My baby gets what she needs when she needs it.” He winked, tongue sweeping. Eyes scanned her outfit and this empty expression crossed. “Don’t need to ask where you’ve been.”

“No, you don’t.” Evie crossed her arms tighter until her coat sleeves rode up along her wrists. Watched Billy pull his cigarettes out to light one. Smoke puffed and he narrowed on her again.

“The fuck is that?” Billy was crossing, jerking Evie’s arm out to pull the sleeve down before she could react. A chill seeped. Violet and rose flower petal like bruises on her forearm and wrists. Splotchy and discolored already. “He do that to you?”

“I didn’t even notice it.” She yanked away. “It’s nothing.”

“Gets rough in the sack. Trying new things because he has a bouncy, cool girl. Or one who acts the part. It’s not you, Evie.” Billy inhaled to flick his ashes.

She didn’t move. Just stared at his eyes. Wondered if Billy thought less of her. She hoped he didn’t.

“Plenty of people like it rough.” Evie scoffed. “He worries about me

when I leave.”

“He worries you might spill the truth to someone. Grabs to make the point. And it sticks long after. Literally.”

Evie blinked. Went around him.

“See you later.”

“You bet.” Billy turned and watched her before leaning against his car. Evie snuck in and heard her mother’s chattering into the phone. More ice up her spine with the low tone.

“Yes, I got it. I don’t want your money, Jack. I told you. Leave us alone.”

“Mom?” Evie gasped it, hurrying into the kitchen to see her mother slam the phone down. Crumbing a letter in her dainty fingers. “Was that dad?”

“No, baby, just calling your aunts to let them know I’m headed out.”

“But, I heard you. I heard you say his name.” Evie pressed. “Did he ask to talk to me?”

“Evie, it was nothing, baby.” Mona hurried around her to toss the envelope into the fire. “Make sure this goes out before you go to sleep tonight. I left money on the fridge and we’re stocked up for the week. Salon will be fine and call if they think they need some extra hands.”

“Mom, I know that was dad. Why are you lying to me?”

“Evie, I’m not going to discuss this. I’m already late to the airport. My taxi’s pulling up.”

“No! Tell me the truth. What’s going on?” Evie had her mother’s luggage so Mona pulled for it. Yanking her daughter to the door. “Mom!” She hated that tears burned her eyes. “Stop lying to me! What’s going on with dad?”

“He doesn’t want us, Evie!” Mona huffed like it truly pained. And it did. “We just have to be fine with that. Sometimes, the Lord tests us. We endure.”

“So, we just don’t talk about it?” Evie tugged again. Flaring up. “We don’t talk about anything that isn’t pretty!”

“Your daddy was a godless man!” Mona burst. “I won’t let him hurt you ever again.”

“Again?”

“Evie, I’m late, baby, I love you. Don’t do this.” Mona pulled her bag free and grabbed her coat. Clicking down the stairs.

“My father loves me!” Evie called after her, stepping onto the porch. Mona’s shoulder rose as she crossed down and ignored it. Got into the taxi as fast as she could so they skidded off.

Evie puffed there. Wiped her sleeves on her wet cheeks.

“Evie?” Max had joined Billy on the sidewalk. Conversation disrupted by the drama at the Fenny house. Evie exhaled cold and blinked until her makeup started to run. Sniffing. “You okay?”

“Y-Yeah, fine.” She saw Billy step toward her and scurried back inside. Listened to the fire crackle some and went to her room. Unable to breathe right, hands felt around the bookcase. All the trinkets waiting.

She thought of Fredrick and his hands squeezing. In bed. Ropes. All the fucking orders he coos in her ear. Her head spinning and it’s not enough to take her away. Not enough for her to dream deeper. Those hands. Yanking as she’s trying to leave to warn her against letting their secret out.

But, he loved her too much. That’s all. Emotional repetition.

Thought of Mona unable to look at her so often. Unable to notice her unraveling and speak of it. Paint a happy face.

Thought of lightning cracking to underscore a boom of weighty

thunder. Palms on her legs.

Not that kind of girl.

Evie covered her ears.

“Stop crying!” She wept with trembling lips. Too many hands roamed her body in darkness. Voices soothed her ears and only made it worse. She stood there patting her cheek, trying to console herself.

Evie plucked up a tiny padlock shaped in a heart. Something you’d clasp your secret diary with. Pushed it into her tongue. Palms flattened on the wall as she tried to swallow. Choked the rust taste down until she was gasping. The lump sunk lower.

Breathing slow.

In control of her thoughts and emotions again.

Evangeline wondered just what kind of girl she was.

** ** *

“Were they fighting?” Max had turned back to Billy leaning into his car. The cigarette smashed under his boot. An aimless shrug followed as the sky began to darken. Eyes fixed on were Evie disappeared to. Streetlights flipped on.

Smoke edged out Billy’s lips before he popped a mint. Woke his senses up.

Max peered at him in a winter coat that was too big for her. Looked like a marshmallow on fire with her red hair.

“You should go check...” She craned to listen for a raspy squeaking under the cold wind. “Hey. Do you hear that?”

“What?” Billy came off his car as she went to the back wheel.

“That crying.”

“Crying?” Billy turned, earring dangling to hear it. “What the hell?”

“Look, it’s...”

“A fucking huge rat trapped in my... Get out of there, you little shit.” He reached over the wheel and grasped trembling fur. Not caring if it bit him.

“Careful.” Max actually laughed at him grunting. Pulling a squirmy ball of matted fluff out to let it dangle there. “It’s not a rat! It’s-”

"Ugly."

"It's a scared kitten."

“Feral thing. It’s just cold and hungry.” Billy watched the nubby paws flail around. It spat a grumpy hiss at him. “Probably lost its mom.”

Max went quiet at that. Billy sighed. Actually looked softer and cradled a dirty grey kitten close to his leather coat. Looking around.

“Little shit.” He broke while it chewed on his thumb. Round head and hungry, little body. Bright blue eyes.

“It’s a sign. Go give it to Evie.” The redhead smiled there. "She misses Bourbon."

“Max, that’s...ah, a good idea.” He stood taller. Made a face. “When did you wise up?”

“Always been smart, you just never noticed.” She grew cheeky. “Don’t come home until Evie feels better.”

Max turned to go back up to the house. Billy exhaled at her, crossed around with the squirming beast. Thumb rubbing soothing circles into it.

"Look cute and friendly for a second, I want this girl to like me." Billy joked to the kitten, practicing a line to himself with a grin. "Hey, Angel, this cat's been on a journey to find you and I'm just getting it home. I am your destiny."

Three knocks. Some shuffling followed before the door cracked.

Evie's face was splotchy. She'd changed into a burnt orange sweater and black leggings.

Billy forgot all his lines.

"What.?" Evie didn't have time to react before he was pushing a ball of fur at her chest.

"Here." He gruffed. "Found it hiding in my car. Smells like exhaust."

A raspy meow followed.

Evie stammered a few words he couldn't even piece together. Eyes bulging at the squeaky thing he'd just shoved at her. Hands scrambled to take it.

"You lost your cat, we figured this one needed a home with someone batshit for cats. Know anyone?" Billy let her gape at him. Blinking several times, Evie tried to speak.

"I, uh...uh, okay. I guess I could...could..." She melted looking at it. "Aww..."

"Already likes you." Billy watched the thing curl up and slow blink at its new mother. Evie sagged, licked her lips to marvel. Words came.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Wouldn't have made it much longer out here without its mom." He looked at the empty swing on their porch. They had one in California. His mom liked to sit on it and hum. On good days. "Mona leaving for the week?"

"Yeah, seeing her older sisters in New Orleans. It's just me until next Sunday." Evie was beaming at the kitten. Comforting it. "Poor thing needs a bath, it's covered in grease."

"Well, just don't give it a stupid name like *Cherry* because we found it on Cherry Lane." He paused, joking. "Or Camaro. Won't hurt my pride."

Billy was turning to go down the steps. Evie bit her lip. Smiled softer.

“What about Blue?” She observed the kitten. “It’s a little girl.”

“Blue?” Billy laughed and peered back at her.

“For the color of your car. And her eyes.” *And your eyes.*

A grin crossed Billy’s lips.

“Not terrible.” He shrugged, leaving.

“Billy.” Evie stepped out onto the welcome mat. Saw him pause there against a sea of white. Illuminated. Obscene. Beautiful boy. “Did...you maybe want to help me get her set up? I was thinking of ordering pizza and heating some apple cider.”

“With caramel?”

“Obviously.” She shrugged. “If you wanted to come in...”

“Is this you forgiving me?”

“I’ll let you think I am.” Evie rolled her eyes and turned with Blue content in her arms. Billy flashed his teeth. Climbed the steps to follow after. Shut the door behind him.

** ** *

“I know, baby, I know.” Evie was washing dirt and grease from the squeaky creature’s fluff. “Poor thing. Hiding in that loud, scary car.”

“My car was its safe haven.” Billy had the phone pressed into his shoulder.

“Loud, scary machine.” She continued, amused. Let him finish the order and hang up.

“Extra cheese and pepperoni fine with you?” Billy crossed to the kitchen sink where Evie settled a tiny makeshift cat bath in.

“Sounds amazing. I didn’t eat much today...” She trailed off.

Caught Billy's eyes on her bruised arms again with her sweater pulled up. "He doesn't hurt me. He's just scared."

"Men hurt worse when they're scared." Was all Billy said. Evie frowned, plucking up the wet kitten to bundle it in a towel.

"That's better, isn't it?" She continued. Cheeks fresh with strawberries. Lips upturned. Calmer while she nurtured it. Billy took note.

"Were you fighting with your mom?" He asked. Evie barely glanced at him.

"Not from my mom's point of view." Her head shook. "My...My dad called. I heard her telling him not to." Evie's eyes lifted. "How many times has he tried to call before? Has he even asked about me?"

"You get along with your dad?"

"He was gone a lot for work business, but we were close. Closer than my mom and I even. He was...really kind and affectionate. Always buying me things. Bringing little gifts home from his long work trips. I used to think he and my mom had this perfect marriage. Something out of an old sitcom."

Evie didn't like to touch these things. Especially not in front of others. But, Billy Hargrove was looking at her. Staring pointedly and unashamed. Something admirable there even if he liked to deflect from himself.

"I'm not sure now if my parents ever loved each other." Billy had replied. Offering a sliver of himself to ease her pain. "Not sure if dad loves Susan either. But, she'll do anything for him. I think he loves that. My mom stopped playing that game."

Evie felt this ocean within her heart roll softly upon a shore. Echoing distant calls.

"Hey, that thing is almost cute now." Billy's quip made her snort. Huge, alien eyes blinked up at them.

"Probably just barely weaned off its mother. Little runt. I have

some soft canned food for now until I can get to the store. Hope you're okay with Bourbon's smell in the house still." Evie cradled the cat and reached into a cupboard. "Let's get you set up in my room. Shall we?"

Billy perked as she looked to him.

"Pizza should be here when I'm done...did you want to pick a movie or something?" Hesitation had her feet shuffling. He could leave.

They seemed to both consider it. Why they were still here. Meeting each other halfway. Did it matter?

People can surprise you. All you can do is let them.

"What'd you have? Dolly's collection." He smiled at her expression there.

"Only on mom's display. C'mere. Bottom shelf. Be amazed." She cleared her throat as Billy entered the bedroom behind her. Neared one of the many bookshelves. This one covered in novels and VHS tapes. Evie set up a litter box and found some toys that hadn't gotten much use. Let the kitten roam her bed and squeak. "Well?"

"I'm impressed with the selection. Carpenter, Craven, De Palma, Hooper... What's a nice girl like you doing with all of Argento's flicks?"

"Enjoying every minute." She knelt down by Billy as he plucked up a tape, laughing.

"Evangeline Fenny owns *The Slumber Party Massacre*?"

"I love a shitty dumpster fire of a movie that can make fun of its own genre. And it was directed by a woman."

"No way," Billy turned it over, "jesus." He pushed it back. "*Sleepaway Camp*, *Carrie*, *Black Christmas*, *The Funhouse*, *Phantom of the Paradise*. How about a classic... Michael or Leatherface?"

"Myers."

“Leatherface is way better.” Billy grabbed *Halloween*.

“Psssh.” Evie plucked Blue up. “He can act like he is.” They went into the living room, paid for the food, and got set up. Movie, warm apple cider, and pizza. Not a date. Just a hang out. Plus the cat. Blue wandered the top of the sofa and tried to play with Billy’s curls.

“Hey, I saved your life, rat.” He leaned forward to bite into a gooey slice. Licking the grease from his lips. Evie giggled at him as the movie started. Technicolor and firelight bathed the dim room. Crackling peacefully.

Evie peered at Billy again, dressed down in a fitted black tee and jeans. She curled her sock clad feet up on the couch. Sighed.

“Is there anything pizza can’t solve?”

“My experience, sex solves whatever’s left.” Billy spoke around a mouthful of food. Earned himself a scowl.

“You pig.”

“I love it when you talk dirty,” he swallowed, wiping his mouth on a napkin, “you do this with the teacher?”

“Still prying.” Evie picked at some crust and went for another slice. “He makes me these fancy dinners. Wine and all. We watch mind numbing old movies. Most of them are three hours long about some boring old guy or they’re a documentary.”

“And that turns you on?”

“No, but Fredrick admires my mind, I like that. He asks me my opinion on things. That’s how we got closer. Through shared books.”

“Until he started prying into your home life and then your skirts.” Billy paused. “He liquors you up?”

“Not really, but sometimes it helps when we have sex.”

“Helps?” Billy set his plate down after four slices. One hand came back around the couch, neared Evie’s hair. Blue stumbled into his

denim clad lap to get comfortable. “Does it hurt or something?”

“I don’t know, sometimes I can’t relax.”

“And he still has sex with you.”

“It’s not a big deal, Billy. I like sex.” Evie turned, speaking over the haunting instrumental on screen. Michael Myers stalking his prey. “It’s not like he popped my cherry or anything. He’s been there for me and I was his confidante too. We have things in common. He just got out of a bad relationship.”

“Yeah, and now he’s collecting on that. Listening to you.” Billy shrugged, reached to pat the kitten in his lap. Evie pressed her lips at the scene, shoulders sagging.

“It feels good with him. I do...feel safe after. Ever been with someone who makes you feel safe?”

There was a lingering beat of them staring. Eyes twinkled while the fire became tangerine embers.

“No, I can’t say that I have.” Billy scooped up the kitten, heard it chirp before he offered it to Evie. Scooting just a little closer to her while Blue got settled again. “Hey.”

“Hm?”

“You’re still here with me.” He smirked, staring at the TV.

“You’re running out of lines, heard that before.” Evie drew closer of her own accord. Felt Billy go impossibly still when her head tipped to his chest. A bold move on her part.

“Just a reminder.” He breathed slow. “What else is there to know about you, Evangeline?”

“Gotta ask questions.” She mused and became too serious. “Who are your favorite female role models?”

“What?” Billy chuckled, touching her curls.

"Mine are Gloria Steinem, Linda Marchiano, Katherine Johnson, and Sacheen Littlefeather. Oh, and Maya Angelou and-"

"Stevie Nicks?"

"Duh."

"I was hoping this would be some easy questions. Like tell me about your favorite pornstar or the biggest dick you've ever seen?"

Her head came up.

"I'm looking at it right now." Evie's leveled tone had Billy bursting with laughter. She went down again. Pride built because he cackled as hard as he did.

"Okay, I back flipped my dumb ass into that one. Fuck." A finger wiped his eyes.

She felt him illuminate. Why was everything he did breathtaking? It felt almost unfair.

"Billy Hargrove can't name a woman." Evie sat up again, amused at his flat expression.

"Joan Jett and Debbie Harry and Etta-"

"You're so trying to win me over with musicians." She poked his chest and settled down against him. Tucked in.

"Is it working?"

"Maybe." She smiled into his chest, inhaling that cologne he liked to bathe in. *Aramis*. Billy felt her grin and sucked in his cheeks. They continued watching for all of five minutes.

Evie shot up again to face him. Billy near shrunk at the staring.

"Do I have something on my face?" His brow rose.

"Okay, I'm asking it because I can't settle." Evie touched her lips and narrowed. Blue cradled close with one hand while the other

lifted to point. "I asked it before so don't have a cow about it."

"No, I don't think we look funny together. That's all you, babe."

She deflated, hand dropping.

"How'd you know I was gonna say that?"

"You worry too much." Billy spied the TV briefly. Peered back at Evie.

"I see the pretty girls you date, it's hard not to think about it. You're here, but are you here because you actually like me? Or is this some weird guilt thing set up from the lies you told earlier." Evie batted her lashes.

"We have a week off of school and I'm eating pizza and watching a horror flick in the Fenny living room." Billy's head cocked while he explained. "Yeah. I lied. But, I like hanging out with you. Sue me."

"This isn't some weird conquest, is it?" She watched Billy scoff and shake his head before she shrugging. Voice growing lush. "Do you like my stomach?" He chuckled again, flicking golden hair aside before he drew his fingertips up her side. Earned a shiver.

"Yeah, it's nice." He said. Those fingers brushed her chin. "I'm still here with you. I still like it. Do you like it?" He licked his lips. Evie studied him and slowly came down. Nestled into his chest to consider it.

A small syllable.

"Yes."

Billy's arm shifted to rest upon her. Palm grazing her hip. Evie blushed. Wondering how his fingers would feel wandering between her thighs again. A burning chill pricked her skin. Billy inhaled that amber scent she was known for. Sighed. Thought about tracing her lips. Thought of her mouth on his neck. And then lower.

Fuck. Not now. Billy tried to breathe again.

“Billy?” Evie piped up after the lengthy beat.

“Yeah?” He shivered. Acutely aware of Evie’s body heat and beating heart against his frame. Her legs pressed into his thigh. Curled into him comfortably with Blue now snoring.

“I forgive you.”

A weight lifted off them both.

When he was dead silent, she went on.

“I called Bubbles, you know, to check on her after the whole Brock thing. Couldn’t stop laughing. She told me about that night. You punching him and the money. I know you’ve been trying to make it right and you don’t even have to. She said she saw you pull up and check on Brock’s date after looking for me. And I...I did really want to go to that motel with you. I haven’t had a night like that with a boy in... Well, never. Maybe we’re not supposed to hang out, but it’s stupid cause I like it-”

Billy cupped her chin and brought their lips together without ceremony. The intensity of a supernova charged his veins. Evie felt it too.

Blue scrambled up and pounced off them to the carpet. Away from Billy pawing for more of Evie. Until hands slid up his hard chest. Tasted the salt on his lips while she threaded fingers into his curls. A salted, caramel kiss from the cider. He roamed her body, unabashed.

Too many sensations. Stars busting. Waves hitting a rocky shore. Absolute fireworks exploding against a sapphire sky.

All those things that made a fairy tale magical. Happening in perfect sync.

Evie didn’t shy as he touched her. Squeezed. Lips on her neck and back to her mouth.

Desire had her dancing in an endless dream.

“Billy...” Evie kissed him again. Deepened it all on her own. Pushed

Billy back into the couch which earned a sound that was truly entertained. Enthralled.

Yes, she wanted him. It almost felt like she needed him and that didn't jar her one bit.

A hand palmed her bottom then tugged at her shirt. She heaved to come up. Blinking some awareness back.

"Let's go to your room." Billy came up for more. Fingers tucked hair aside. He nipped at her lip and Evie gasped.

"We can't...I can't. I'm still. I'm with him. I can't be..." She slid off. Left Billy breathless there puffing. Throbbing. His pants already had the tiniest wet spot.

"But, you want to?" He shoved up. All fluttered. "It's okay if you don't."

Evie curled herself into the smallest ball she could. Faced elsewhere.

"Yes." She strained. Hugging herself close. "It's not that I'm still mad. Fredrick even said I could... But, I know he doesn't mean it. He'll get upset and freak out thinking I told someone. He broke things off with me after summer and I never told anyone, but I know...he might have been just seeing if I'd come back. And I did."

It seemed to hit her for the first time.

"I'm sleeping with my fucking teacher. Oh fuck."

"He'll leave more bruises on you?" Billy stilled as she snapped to see him with glossy eyes. Face scrunching.

"I like it when he's rough."

"Because it helps you go somewhere else in your mind." Billy huffed, leaning in. "When my dad... When he... Sometimes I like it when it's hard. Because I press into walls and pretend I can sink into them."

Evie thought of Fredrick and how he complained about her way of sleeping.

"He helped me and I helped him." A crack. "No one's ever gonna love me like he does."

He leaned in with intensity building.

"If he told you that, Evie, he doesn't love you." Billy uttered that too inordinate in sweetness. She almost shattered.

"He's taught me things. He wants me... He sees a future and I think I can't turn away from that." She whimpered pitifully.

"Only thing he's teaching you is how to give in and hate yourself quieter." A cord struck so Billy eased it. "I'm not trying to make you feel like shit. You need to hear this."

"He wants me, just me."

"He wants his image of you! Does he tie you up? Some of those look like rope burns, Evie." Billy slid in and grasped one hand.

She wiggled and didn't pull away. Saw Billy's eyes.

"Adults are supposed to fucking help us. Maybe he did at first, but he crossed a line with you because he couldn't keep his weird fantasies in check. Of course he taught you things, you're young..."

"It doesn't matter."

"All of it matters. What, does he liquor you up and make you watch porn? Point and ask why you can't be more like those girls crying on screen because they're moaning and sobbing and being pushed past their limits."

"He says he loves me and he's proud of me. I like making him happy." Evie made an odd shuddering sound. Lips pressing before something fractured distantly. "I can't just leave him. I love him too, but--"

"But, what? There's no such thing as an 'I love you, but'..."

"I'm scared, Billy, and I'm so stupid." Evie buried her face in her knees when the pressure built. Lost it.

Cried there in front of him. Hating herself for being so fragile and weak. It jarred Billy to see Evie Fenny truly hurt and terrified of this relationship she mooned over so often.

Trauma twisted you like fresh snow covering what was there before. Frozen solid to hide it with something that shimmered.

Arms lifted to bring her into his chest. Evie resisted on instinct and then melted down. Sobbed into his tee. Wet the soft fabric. Clung. Listened to Billy's heart race.

"I don't know what to do, he keeps talking about the future. Whisking me away and marrying me, I thought I wanted that. I'm supposed to, but I don't." Evie pushed up to wipe her red eyes. "He doesn't even care about my music, he wants me to be a housewife. I can't even fucking make descent pasta."

She laughed bitterly at that.

"Fredrick wants all these kids and I don't. I'm...I'm still a kid. Fuck, I..." Felt like she only just realized that too. "I don't even have myself together, how could I put another kid like me into the world? And what if I get old and he finds another young girl with issues, huh, what happens then? I know it's all fucked, I do, but I can't stop it."

"Evie, hey, look at me." Billy was trying to cup her face. Met with more resistance as she couldn't stomach looking him in the eye while crying. Evie backed out and wiped her face again. Swallowed the empty lumps in her throat. Tremoring. "You gotta leave this guy. He's gonna get worse. You're fucking shaking."

"...I know." She squeaked. "Sometimes I feel like I might shatter if I disappoint him. Have you ever felt like that?"

"Yeah. And I shattered anyway."

Billy Hargrove stopped dead. Displayed this blaring vulnerability that was miraculous on him.

Saw a girl in clear, ruby red danger.

"I'm just so tired, Billy, I never thought I'd be so tired at seventeen." Evie started to cling again and he let her. Fingers pulling for more of him and so he offered more in return. Tucked Evie under his chin. Still here with her.

Frankly, neither of them worried about that any longer.

"My mom didn't leave my dad when she should have. Not early enough. He messed her up pretty bad. She had a lot of problems she never got over." Billy cracked through the layers of volcanic rock hardened around his heart. She shifted to see him there. One finger drew the tears from her cheeks. Evie searched his eyes. Flickering. No longer hearing the screams on screen behind them.

"What happened to her, Billy?" She saw this star fall behind his eyes and wished she could have caught it.

Billy pulled her in closer until they were lying together. His mouth pressed into dark ringlets to murmur. Inhaling all the heat in her perfume. Honey amber.

"She died." His lips cast too gentle syllables. Evie held him back. Tangled bodies.

Souls locking together without fear among dwindling embers.

"And I don't want you to die too."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for reading! I love these two so so much. As always, chat with me below or on my tumblr, Alias-B :)

10. A Little More Sin

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello everyone. Slice of life in Hawkins when Evie ventures out and encounters different residents. Warning that things are going to take a turn so TW for manipulating and explicit physical abuse. Light racism. Evie receives some horrible threats when she tries to make a change for the better. Thank you all for turning in.

There were some peculiar things Billy Hargrove noted about the way Evie Fenny slept.

She burrowed into whatever was around. Face buried like she might be trying to smother herself.

She made little noise except occasional whimpers. Arguably cute.

She went dead still. He checked to make sure the girl was breathing at one point.

His favorite were the whines that erupted when he tried to untangle himself from her on the couch. Early morning daylight streamed between curtains. Silent white noise scattered the television.

A reminder of snow tumbling fresh and pristine. Washing away what was before it. Evie had fallen asleep in her fit of exhaustion still wrapped in him.

Billy simply didn't feel like leaving so he fell too. Cast in amber. Bodies molded together.

Evie turned to burrow into the sofa and Blue came to nestle just above her crown of big curls. Billy peered at the empty pizza box and grabbed a marker to scribble a note she'd wake to. Propped it up and grabbed his coat.

Paused to admire her because that was inevitable. One look cast

before he was out into the grey morning. Ice and snow as far as the eye can see.

“Shit. I'm still in Hawkins.” Billy perched a cigarette between his lips and lit up. Prepared himself for Max's gawking when he walked in that door.

Evie stirred another hour later. Still smelling Billy's cologne all over the couch and herself. Blue sat perched, licking her knuckle. No doubt begging for more food.

“I know,” Evie pushed out a groan, “I got you.” Brown eyes focused on bold, black letters. Marked into the grease stained pizza box.

Billy long gone.

Probably freaked that a girl sobbed on him and passed out. Evie huffed to herself. Rubbed her eyes and plucked up the box to read.

“Gonna ask you out...again. Tonight. Seven. I'll even let you pick where we go.”

Evie shook her head and pushed up.

Figured another night with Billy Hargrove is one of the few things in her life that won't hurt.

*** ** **

If you asked her, she'd lie.

Evie totally wasn't out picking a new top for her not-date with Billy. Definitely not.

She wasn't worrying over the exact placement of her curls and wondering if Billy thought they were pretty down over her shoulders.

Poor girl just...felt the urge to thrift shop. Most of her shirts and dresses were altered items she'd found. Ugly patterns galore. Evie mused over a top with an intricately painted bowl of fruit on the front and spotted a familiar helmet of red hair sitting near the fitting rooms.

"It doesn't fit me. It's too big." Came a rough woman's voice from behind the curtain.

Carol only huffed as she checked her manicure and stood. Evie hid behind a tall rack of dresses when a woman came out.

She might have had the same vibrant red hair as her daughter. Once. But it was lifeless and tossed into a bun on her head.

Carol's mother. Dorthy Perkins. Skinny, nervous thing with a slight pouch to her stomach. Tooth gap and some healed sores in her hairline. Kept rubbing her covered arms. Sunken in and shaky. Noticeable sweat on her forehead.

Obviously in need of a fix. She used to be a beauty queen like Mona. They might have even competed together, they both had daughters too young.

She came out in a velvety blouse that was too long for her torso. Little baggy around the arms.

"You didn't tie it right. Here." Carol wasn't her usual bubbly self. Not the girl who schemed about terrorizing underclassmen. "Maybe we can tuck it into something."

"I look so ugly." Her mother peered aside. Covered her face. "That's why Jason walked out."

"He's a piece of shit." Carol mumbled.

"He was like a father to you. We spent almost seven years together. I'm ugly."

"Stop saying that. We're better off without him." Carol asserted herself that time.

"He'll be back, he always is."

Carol only frowned, faltering. That much was true.

The false hope of it all killed.

"This color is pretty." She went on instead. "You like blue. We can tuck it into that black skirt you have. Maybe a belt."

"Skirt's no good. It's all worn and discolored. Never should have let you do the laundry."

"Someone had to. I said sorry. You were drunk and...I saw those needles."

"Carol, don't speak to me like that." This switch flipped on. She snatched her daughter's wrist. Looked like she might try to break it.

Evie never saw that look in Carol's eyes before. It pricked her own heart with pure, pooling fear. This girl who always looked her best and turned her nose up toward everyone else.

Because she knew better.

Carol and Evie had that much in common.

Her mother continued. Darkening.

"I was not drunk. I gave it up. I'm better."

Carol wiggled away uncomfortably. Winced at her now irritated flesh. Looked around to make sure no one saw them.

"Just keep your voice down. We'll figure out something. You need a nice outfit. You have to get this job. Nail place doesn't pay me enough. I just started." Carol shook her head at the same time Evie knocked into some hangers backing up.

Instantly, she was spotted.

"Evangeline Fenny." Her mother plastered this crackling smile as she stood taller. Carol's arms crossed. Immediate hatred. "Did you lose weight?"

"*Mom.*" Carol hissed.

"Hi..." Evie blinked, lips lifting. "And, no, but thank you."

“Oh well, you look pretty. How’s your mother?” It was a courtesy. Mona wasn’t close with Mrs. Perkins. Or Carol’s stepdad. They weren’t liked in Hawkins. Kept to themselves in a dingy house. Drinkers. Users.

But, that’s all nasty gossip. Carol was quick to shut it down.

“Fine.” Evie started to shuffle off because Carol looked like she was begging silently. Paused. “I like that color too and you can hem the bottom.”

“Not all of us sew.” Carol turned to Evie. Evie reached into her one of her reusable grocery bags. Pulled out a little package.

“I like to cheat with this. Hem tape. It’s fast, you just iron it along the bottom. It holds well.”

“Let me pay you for that.” Mrs. Perkins grabbed her worn purse.

“No, it’s cheap and I picked up extra. They had a sale today.” The second part was a lie. Evie held it as far out as she could. Carol crossed over. Plucked it from her hand with glittery pink gemstones for fingertips.

A beat. Two girls orbiting the same great planet. Threatening to be yanked into a storm.

“Thanks.” Carol sucked her cheeks in. “Mom, go change.”

“See you late, Evie.” The woman wandered off. Carol inhaled sharper. Peered at Evie again.

“New top to show off for Bowers when school starts?” She flicked her tangerine locks, brow lifting.

Evie pressed her lips. Brown eyes narrowing.

“It’s good to see you too, Carol.” She avoided that and turned.

“I just think you should give it up. It’s really pathetic. Everyone thinks so.” Carol sneered. Looked anywhere else. “The girl who went psycho on Tannen. Dressing up for our teacher. He’s just being nice

because he feels sorry for you.”

Evie paused to peer back. Felt her own pity swell.

“Then, I guess you have nothing to worry about. Huh.” She watched Carol flame up and went to pay for her items. Not able to look back. Not able to admit a connection was possible or that such distinct planets could ever align.

Boots hurried out into the cold, cheeks blooming rosy. She wrapped her scarf tighter and got near the bus stop before a hand was jerking her around into the side of a brick building.

Speak of the devil and he'll appear. Evie's shoulders went up.

“What the fuck, Tannen? I thought Hawkins was scum you'd never set foot in.” She grunted. Saw his furious eyes dart.

“You really think I don't know about your fucking band of ragtag shitheads? I saw you all.” He pressed his hand into the wall.

“Heard you're single now.” Evie remarked. Fingers ripped her up a few inches by the coat.

“Don't fuck with me, Fenny.” He said lower. Dangerous as can be.

“You already tried that game, Brock, and you lost.” Evie spat back there in the snow. He dropped her down. Laughed.

“Got closer than you liked. We had a moment.”

“It was a kiss and you were a creep.”

"You spazzed, girl, and I'm gonna find out why. What has Evie Fenny so shaken up?"

"Have you considered it's the effect you have?" Evie sneered.

“Better be careful in the coming weeks. I just wouldn't go anywhere alone.” Across the street, his dad hollered for him, coming out of city hall.

"Daddy's calling. Bet you're having trouble getting away from his watchful eyes." Evie shrugged. Shoving his arm away. "Stay away from me."

"Like I'd ever hit this for real. Fucking *Psycho Sybil*. That's what we call you up at Ridgemont. You're a fat, fucking slut and you'll never be anything else."

"Excuse me!" A sharper voice cut in. Tannen leaned out from Evie to peer at Mr. Clarke. Bundled and unsuspecting. Not intimidating by any means, but he wasn't backing down. "I think you outta leave her alone, Mr. Tannen."

"We were just talking, sir." Tannen peered at Evie, backing up. "For now. See you around, Fenny. Bet on that." His dad called for him again so he crossed to go to their expensive, red car.

"Are you alright, Evie?" Scott Clarke. Hawkins Middle. One of Dustin's idols.

She just sniffled. Hadn't realized she'd even welled up.

"Yeah. Fine."

"You know he's the jerk, right?"

Evie roused to laugh, nodding. *Psycho Sybil*. That was a new one.

"Yes, I do. Thanks." She looked down at her feet.

"Did you take the bus here?" He had a bag of books from the library in hand. Evie nodded again. "Do you want a ride home? I'd feel better knowing you're safe. Don't worry about guys like that. He's going to lose all his hair and money and amount to nothing."

Evie broke again to giggle. Little brighter now. What a teacher.

"Y-Yeah, I guess so." Eyes peered at Scott's grey car. "Is...that a DeLorean?"

"Gift from me to myself. My pride and joy now. Neat, huh? Dustin loved it. Do you still babysit him?"

“Not a lot these days, he’s best friends with Steve Harrington. A real cool guy now. I’m old news.” Evie stepped forward, adjusting with all her bags.

“I’m sure that’s not true. You’re pretty snazzy as they kids say... They do say that, right?”

“Ahhh, not really.” Evie watched him chuckle.

Mr. Clarke wasn't like her dad. Lanky and sweet. Always ready to brighten your dad being dorky. Jack was a cool business man. Smooth talker. Scott always made time for his students too. That was the biggest difference.

“Can I get you home safe? No pressure, I just can’t stand to see a boy act like that.” Scott gestured and Evie pressed her lips.

“Okay.” She almost said no. Had this gut feeling she should have. Not because of Scott. The guy was a sitcom star and a genius. A genuinely good man. But, a feeling gnawed like she was being watched. The door swung up.

“Neato, right?”

“That’s certainly one word. How strange.” Evie got in and Scott came around. Turned the car on to go. “Thanks...for the ride and for saying something. You didn’t have to.”

“Of course, I did. Stepping in when we see that behavior is important. It's bare minimum. I was bullied when I was young and one day I decided I wasn't going to take it anymore. The rest is history. Good history.” He turned a corner. Fiddled with the radio trying to find something the kids listen to. Evie smirked a little at that. “How’s your mom doing?”

“She’s...okay. Working a lot more.”

“And yourself? I know you had a rough year. I hope that’s not too forward to say. I try to ask Claudia about how your family is. Purely worried teacher talk. You know? I consider Mona a good friend.” He beamed there. Blushing.

"No, uh, it's been hard. I guess." Evie shrugged. Stared at the trees.

"My parents divorced when I was about your age. It was hard on me. My mom was one tough cookie, even found love again and they're still happily married. Silver lining." Mr. Clarke explained. "And I might not understand it fully myself, but I recently ended a relationship. Couple months and we both agreed with her relocating. Still friends even. Nice end. But, it's something hard to process. A person not being there."

Evie turned to see him watching the road carefully. Something resonated deeply.

"Mr. Clarke?"

"Yes?"

"How...do you end a relationship nicely?"

"You just be as honest as you can, I suppose. This is a person who cares about you, they should understand at some length. Life takes us so many places." He paused at a light and turned onto Cherry. "Which house were you?"

"4817, right next to the Hargrove's there." Evie pointed, gathering her items. "I'll tell my mom you said, hello. Thanks again."

"Certainly, do that. Strange not seeing her every morning in that cafe by her shop. Take care and don't let losers like Mr. Tannen bring you down."

"I won't, Mr. Clarke." Evie beamed again and pushed out. "See you around." She stood and jumped at Billy next to his mailbox. A wide grin crossing because of the car make.

"Look who has style." Billy bent over to see and Evie rolled her eyes. "Mr. Clarke. We should race sometime."

"Staying out of trouble, Mr. Hargrove?"

"Always." He stood taller to wink at Evie as she waved then shut the door so Mr. Clarke could drive off. "And no one's pushed that guy

into a locker?"

"He's snazzy as the kids say." Evie joked. Billy snickered to himself. "So, Tannen cornered me. He's upset."

"He cause you trouble?" Billy was distractedly stuffing a cigarette into his mouth. Evie's lips quirked before she plucked it out. Turned it over so he had the correct end between his teeth.

Billy blinked at her proximity.

"Tried to. His dad is on him and Mr. Clarke saved the day. I don't care about Tannen." Psycho Sybil. Fat slut. Trying to dress up and impress her teacher. Her teacher that she was fucking. Every syllable was another sharp tack in her stomach.

Evie shifted her eyes so he changed the subject. Suggestive.

"You get my note?"

"Hard to ignore." She peered back at him.

"That's how I'd best describe myself, Angel." Billy mused, blowing smoke aside. Got closer to drop the baritone. "And if I were to show up at the scheduled time? I'll even wear the white shirt you like."

A smile betrayed her face. Nose crinkling. Billy matched it. Not yielding.

"I might be open to a discussion at that time." Evie turned. Voice softening. Still intent. "There's something I need to do first."

Billy didn't ask what. Just watched her saunter up into her house. Enjoyed the view.

After locking the door, Evie unpacked her bags.

"Yes, I got you something too." She watched Blue come to paw at plastic. "I spoiled you, actually. Let's eat and put your new collar on, shall we?"

Evie got some stuff done. Food. Real food. Got Blue set up with

some cat necessities. Red collar with a shiny bell. Pulled out her sewing machine to work on a couple garments. Until her hands ached. Distractions were good.

Her personal phone trilled.

“Fenny residence.” She plucked it up. Same lacquer candy apple as her painted nails.

“Evie.” Terse.

“Fredrick. You’re calling me?”

“I know your mother isn’t home and it’s your line,” he explained, “I figured we were safe.”

“I was...actually going to call you soon, can we talk?”

“Oh?” His tone changed. “Now?”

“In person.”

“Right, then I’ll come get you in a bit.”

“No, there’s a bus. I’ll take that.” Evie paused. “It’s important.”

“Don’t let anyone see you on the street. See you soon.”

“Yes.” They hung up. Evie pulled on a fresh shirt and red hoodie. Brought it up over her curls. Bundled herself to venture out around four that afternoon. Three hours should have been enough. Red riding hood venturing to see the world.

She caught the bus and got off a street over. Tried to breathe. Nervous hands applied some strawberry tinted chapstick before she knocked.

“Come in.” Fredrick hurried her inside with one arm. They stood together in the narrow hallway of his rental flat. She brought her hood down. Prepared. He jumped ahead of her, dead set. “Dear, I think I know what this is about.”

"You do?" Evie dropped her arms. Standing inches from him.

"The marriage talk. Listen, I shouldn't have pushed it. I know you probably think coming here to agree to it is what you want. Being a young girl, running off into the sunset is what you dreamed of. But, make sure you're choosing the best decision for you."

"That's not why I'm here." Evie spoke flatter. He double took at her expression. Got almost nervous.

"It's not?" His entire body shifted.

"No." Evie replied. Plain and simple. Not even a second thought.

It seemed to jar him. She wasn't swooning into his arms or falling to her knees in worship.

"Well, I'm still glad you're here." Instantly, Fredrick was on Evie. Snatched her jaw forth for a kiss. Cupped the back of her head and moaned. Needy and sudden. Not the cool, collected teacher who was *tsking* because a young girl was falling deeply for him.

"Wait." Evie was just standing there with her lips open. Eyes on a decorative framed print of Zeus and Europa. Not reciprocating while his tongue wormed inside. "*Mmf*, wait." She tilted her head back. "I wanted to talk." Brown eyes looked all directions.

"Let's talk after," he purred, "my sweet Evie. Look so pretty in red. Straight from the pages of *Lolita*. Sometimes I want to call you that, it'd fit you. You never did like Evangeline." It was clearly a joke, but she didn't laugh. "Oh, what about Abigail? From *The Crucible*. We always liked her. Something with a little more sin."

Psycho Sybil. Abigail. *Lolita*.

"I really want to just talk, is that okay?" Asking permission to not have sex. That was a new one and he did appear irritated. She shuffled and held herself when he stepped back.

"What's going on, Evie?" He stood a great deal taller, hands on his hips.

"I think..." She tried to find all the right words. "I think maybe we should slow down?"

"Slow down."

"Ah...stop." Evie corrected herself. Aching. "I think we-"

"What were you doing in that man's car today?" Fredrick cut in. Ignoring her.

"You saw me?"

"Yes, I was running my errands and I know I can't approach you. It'll look too strange. What was that about?"

"It... Mr. Clarke was just giving me a ride home." Evie brought her hand up. Clutched at her hoodie.

"I just wondered if maybe you had a pattern." He turned his head and shook it idly. "Let's go sit down. Talk like adults." He ushered Evie into the living room. She didn't want to sit but followed to do it anyways. "What's all this about, Evie? Explain it to me."

"I care about you. You were there for me. I know that and I don't... I won't take it for granted. I'm just...distracted. You know, high school is ending and I think this..." Evie closed her eyes. The truth of it was ice. "I don't want this."

"This? Us?"

She pressed her lips. Tried to stare at his face. Too many emotions flitting across it.

"I think we just want different things. And that's okay-"

"You came back, Evie. All that time we spent together. That incredible summer we had. We were happy. It can always be like that."

"But," Evie realized it too, "it won't be."

"I know you're scared. But, the future." He took her hand in both of

his. Held it tight. "Our future. We planned it. You must be terrified. Your dad left, that doesn't mean I'll leave you. I'll never leave you, Evie. That's what this is about, isn't it?"

"N-No..." Evie trembled. Unable to wiggle her hand away. "I think we should...just part ways. I'll switch classes if you want. I need to focus on finishing school and-"

"I don't want you to switch classes, do you think I can't be mature about this?" He narrowed on her awed face. "This isn't you, what's gotten into your head all the sudden? Is there someone else?"

She froze. Honesty. He loved her, he'd understand.

"It's not about that."

"But, there is someone else?" Fredrick shook his head. Ran one hand into blond hair. Still clutching her wrist. "You tell them about us? Huh? This isn't some silly high school game. I asked you for one thing. To keep it together." He jerked Evie into him.

"No! I didn't." She winced. "You're hurting me."

"No, I'm not." Fredrick scoffed. Like she was being truly unreasonable. Alarms started to go off in her brain.

"I'll never tell anyone, just...please. I can't do this. It's me. I can't do this. I have to work on myself and it's not fair to you. That's all." Evie tried to stand.

"We're talking still, Evangeline!" A finger pointed before he tugged her back into him. Hands latched around her arms. Squeezed harsh marks into skin. "I don't understand. Suddenly, you want out. You're acting all afraid of me? Who knows about us?"

"No one!" She whimpered. Lungs sputtering. "I won't ever tell anyone. I promise. I just need to think."

"You can think right here." He soothed. Pulling her into his chest. All the games where he played hard to get and she crawled back were lost. He really might lose her. That blared. "Let's get something to calm your nerves. Then, you can rest and we can keep talking. I

fought so hard for us. You understand that? Do you even care?"

"I don't need to drink. I think I should just go home. I care, that's why I need to do this. It's a good thing. We can...still be friends." Evie's palms were spread on his chest. "My mom--"

"Isn't even in town. I hardly think she'll care even if her daughter is out late. Isn't that right, dear? We both know she's always been more preoccupied with her salon and who she's screwing than her own daughter." Blue eyes were alight at her. Evie went very still. "I'm the adult, I should have told your mother from the first. But, I couldn't deny you. And she doesn't even care about you, Evie, not like I do."

"Don't say that..."

He started to charge. A mad bull clicking its hooves.

"Everything we have, you just want to throw away? Move on and giggle with all your fucking little friends about me? Is that it? Think you can laugh at me and leave like my wife did-?"

"Ow, please, let me go." Evie started to twist in the struggle. Terrified and yanking as he tugged her back into his chest. "That hurts, Fredrick, please. You're hurting me."

"I love you, god damn it!" He shook her. Began to flame. "You want to go? Fine!"

A hard shove sent her head bouncing into the wall. Flames burst.

Evie tumbled over into hardwood. Eyes wet. Slumped down. The world almost went black. When she didn't get up immediately, he was over her. Shifting curls from her face as she made this odd croak. Skull throbbing white hot.

Memories flashed and burnt.

"Shit... Shit, Evie. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that. You do this to us, you know? Oh, I just love you too much, I won't lose you. You're okay, it's fine. Come, let's get you to lie down. I'll make you feel better."

Evie licked her lips. Curls shaking as her head rose to see him. Hands braced on the floor to steady her dizzy frame.

The truth burned now. Became ashes.

“I don’t love you anymore.” She offered. Small and assured. Fredrick exhaled, petting her hair aside. Time slowed.

“Since, when?” He grew breathless as if he didn’t understand.

“Now. Just now.” Evie pushed up into the wall. Curled away from his hands. “I want to stop.”

“Stop? After everything.”

“It’s me...and it’s you. This was wrong. It’s so *wrong*.” She sniffled. Mascara running. “I think I should go home now. I don’t feel well.”

“What if I said, no? What if I said, I don’t want you to go home?” A slow hand curled around her arm again. He got close to her face. Started to kiss her lips and temple. “I’m so sorry, Evie. Just come to bed and lie down.” He cupped her tender head, nodding. A smile beamed. “We’ll talk about this. I’ll make you feel so good. Yeah? Because only I know how.”

She tried to be hard. Tried to scare this man who still cast a shadow over her body. Fredrick started to pull her up. Pawing. Evie resisted and stayed on the floor.

“Then, I’ll tell people about you. About us.”

“Evie,” he froze to speak slower as if she was stupid, “it’s your word against mine.”

“I have a lot of words to describe you and this place and things we did. Your word against mine. I don’t need the world to believe me. Just a couple people will be enough...” She trembled and steeled against him. Fredrick dropped her like she scorched him. “They’ll ask you questions. So, let me go-”

“Is that so? You want to ruin my life?” He set his jaw.

Evie's expression wrinkled with contained fury. A wave that would destroy an oncoming ship.

"No, you do."

One snap. She felt the air leave her body. Yanked out crudely. A jerk that howled up her stomach. Sent her diaphragm into a panic.

He'd kicked her. Hard. Directly in the side. She came up choking and Fredrick lost his mind. Kicked her in the rib and hip until she was curled against the wall. Limbs flailing.

Screaming.

Fredrick began to panic too. As the sound echoed. Started to slap at her until that screaming stopped. Evie ripped his shirt trying to wiggle away into the hall. Got jerked over on her side

"Quiet. Just be quiet, Evie! Shut up!" One knee came down into her chest, held Evie still. Metal seeped along her tongue. A fist closed and the entire crescent of her eye swelled. Sound cut. A hand smacked her lips. Smothered her down.

Evie's whimper choked there. She stilled. Petrified.

The frame with poor Europa crashed to the floor. Long fractures cast her painted, twisting body.

Evie stared at it. The shape of the mighty, handsome bull Zeus turned himself into to lure prey. Sweeping lovely Europa off her feet. Lungs were still sputtering to take in fresh air. Not getting enough.

For a moment, Evie thought he'd really kill her. Turned pink. Then red. Then blue. Then purple.

"I...c-can't breathe." It was the tiniest squeak imaginable. His knee shifted and some air seized.

"I just need you to be quiet," Fredrick whimpered. "I'll let you go. Okay. I'll let you go right home if you do it silently. If you tell someone about us, I'm going to have to hurt you again. I won't let you ruin my life. Just like my fucking wife. You can't be like her. You

were too special. So, I'll hurt you, Evie. Do you want that? Do you think I want this?"

The moment her head shook, his hand came up. A gasp as she was able to breathe again. Choking and coughing. Dying.

"Fuck." Fredrick turned her body over. "Can you move everything, alright?"

Evie refused to look at him.

"Why'd you make me do that, Evie? I can't believe you. Screaming like a fucking child. I just needed you to be quiet. I wasn't trying to hurt you, damn it, I just needed you to be quiet." He was breathing heavily. Frantic. Same way he would after screwing her. "God damn it."

Hands roamed to check her over. Fredrick hovered, tilted her face toward his to prod.

"Look like a broken doll like this. You're still so pretty. You're okay. It's not bad." That sounded like a lie. Evie could feel her eye socket puffing. Boiling heat. "We can make it better."

He kissed her unmoving lips. Desperately.

"You should stay here, let me look after you." He cooed that. Came down to lie next to her. Bringing her head into his. Stroking her hair and kissing her hot, salty cheek. "I'm sorry."

Fredrick was crying too. Into her neck. Hard.

"I can't lose you. I can't stop thinking about you some days. I was ready for it to be you. Do you realize that? If this is about... Just tell me, let me fix it. *Evie*. I don't want you to leave me." He came up and sniffled pathetically. Like a baby. Saw her cold, empty eyes. "I love you, I need you to take care of me. Please, Evie."

Psycho Sybil. Abigail. Lolita. Europa. A little more sin.

Evie was somewhere else. Pressed into the wall to disappear. A hand touched her knee and Evie seized up. Scrambled back. Aching.

Gasping to just be far, far away.

“I won’t tell anyone.” She said without a tremor of emotions. Eyes distant. Evie pushed herself up carefully while he hovered. “I’m gonna go home now. I’ll be so quiet.”

“Let me drive you. Evie. I can fix this.” He begged and pulled at her clothes. “I can put you back together.”

Evie limped to the door.

“No, you can’t, Fredrick,” she droned, “but thank you for trying anyways.” That would mean something. Anything.

It had to, right?

The door shut and he didn’t run after her. Evie whimpered up to the bus stop while cold licked her cheeks dry. Snow and ice glimmered. Too beautiful for how ugly she felt. She pulled her hood up and paid. Draped herself across a seat in the back.

Another two riders got on. Tommy H with an older woman in a plush coat. His stepmom. Caused some controversy back when Tommy was a child. His white dad would marry a black woman after Tommy’s mom passed away. Cancer.

Christ. This fucking town.

Nice lady. Sometimes she came into Mona’s shop to see her because Mona knew her way around textured curls. Evie sank down, but Tommy noticed her.

It was strange, the expression that crossed his face. She was hidden in her hoodie half behind her puffy curls. But that splotchy face and discolored skin gave the obvious away.

He didn’t jeer and instead sat down. Peered out at the street and saw the orange Plymouth there. Eyes narrowed.

“Sorry about the car, mom.” He spoke when she joined him.

“It happens, honey, it’ll be out of the shop tomorrow. We’ll tell dad

that I bumped the basketball hoop.” She winked so he flashed a smile, eyes shifted to Evie again intent out the window.

A couple more riders trailed on. Some hick knocked into Mrs. Hagan’s shoulder on the way. Muttered a ugly slur Evie had heard Mr. Hargrove say on his front lawn. Jeering at their perfectly normal neighbors across the way.

“You want me to kick your ass, man? Apologize to my mother!” Tommy shot up. Protective little cub. The hick wobbled on his drunk feet. Shrunk to go to a seat as Mrs. Hagen pulled her boy down.

“He’s not worth it.”

“I won’t let people talk to you that way.” Tommy’s fists curled. Beet red. "Still my mom." She only kissed his cheek and brought him to her shoulder. Evie watched the back of Tommy’s head. Felt something similar that had curled up her spine when she saw Carol today too.

We all had our shit.

Tommy watched Evie get off at her stop. Didn’t say a word. She made herself small and went up into her house. Shut the door.

Didn’t eat anything. Bones rattled while she got into bed and curled up. Hoodie pulled close. Blue nestled by her crown, purred to comfort her.

Evie stayed there. Didn’t cry. Hated herself.

Didn’t rouse when the knocks began at seven.

Psycho Sybil. Abigail. Lolita. Europa. A little more sin.

Never Evangeline.

Notes for the Chapter:

Definitely a harder chapter to write. Almost too personal. Thank you guys for following and chat with me below or on my tumblr, Alias-B.

11. My Heart Burns There, Too

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for being so patient with my writing. I'm branching back out slowly into my fics and hoping to keep posting them. The aftermath of Evie's attack and some needed love from friends. Billy taps into a darker part of his life to protect her and realizes what she's beginning to mean to him. TW: Abuse, mentions of past student/teacher relationship, Billy's anger.

Billy's knuckles turned pink from the incessant pounding.

A huff.

Maybe Evie was standing him up.

Something pricked his stomach. Told him to keep trying.

"Evie!" He called. "I know you're home..."

Nothing. Behind him, a car had pulled up.

"Billy?" Heather parked and got out. Fucking pretty boy in her passenger seat. He and Steve still weren't chummy even after the revenge plot.

"What are you doing here, princess?"

"Was gonna see if Evie wanted to hit the movies with us." Arms crossing, her hip cocked. Priss. "Something to do."

"You're too late, I laid claim to Fenny tonight. She's going out with me." Billy knocked again. "Once I get her ass out here... Evie!"

"Is she?" Heather eyed him closer and approached. "Is she even home?"

"Think so." Billy crept around the side of the house to her window.

Knocked. Nothing.

“Way to be a total creep.” Steve remarked, hands shoving into his pockets. Half amused at Billy’s persistence.

“I see a lump on her bed through the blinds. Curtain is cracked.” Billy huffed. “Hey, Evie!”

“Something happened.” Heather’s eyes changed as Billy turned to see her. The expression made his pulse speed. “Evie did this after her dad left. Evie!” She knocked too. “Your friends are here!”

“Okay, I’m breaking in.” Billy went around front. Felt about the windows with the other two behind him.

“Whoa, wait a second, aren’t you-?”

“Harrington, the neighbors here really don’t give a shit. They won’t call the cops for anything.” Billy looked elsewhere as he said that. “Believe me.”

Steve watched him jiggle a window.

“Is it unlocked?” Heather came back up the steps.

“Yeah.” Billy yanked it up. Climbed in and shut it, went to open the front door. Steve groaned and followed them inside.

“Evie.” Billy entered the bedroom. Blue jumped up to come climb his leg. “Even the damn cat is ready for our...date...thing.” He couldn’t think of a better word. One hand plucking the ball of fluff from his hip to push it at a confused Steve.

Evie still didn't move to get up. Just breathed.

“What’s going on?” Billy got tender. “Hey.”

He came to her first. Evie bundled and hidden upon her bed in the dim light while the sky grew darker. Heather trailed after with Steve in the doorway.

“Go away.” A muffled croak followed. Heather sighed and sat

down. Put her chin on Evie's shoulder. Felt her friend go stiff.

"Hey...we'd really like to see you. What happened, Evie? Please talk to me." She sounded truly afraid. Hands peeled the comforter away. Evie hid herself into the pillow. Arms up to pull her hood further. Curls splayed in tufts of loose frizz

"Evie, come on," Billy climbed near her legs, "we'll go outside if you just want to talk to Heather."

"I just wanted him to stop." Evie's fingers curled, voice cracking and glazed with tears. "I wanted it to stop. I didn't mean to be so loud, I was just trying to make it stop."

"Wanted what to...?" Heather trailed off when Evie shot up. Hands braced and facing away still. Shaking. "You're scaring me. Evie." A gentle hand brought the hood back. Evie smoothed her curls and sniffled harder. Slowly, turned her head while a finger clicked her bedside lamp on.

Matching gasps followed.

"Oh, my god! Who did this to you?" Heather sprang into action but Evie's head fell to her chest. Arms cradled her. Soothing. "Hey, I got you. We're here." Sweet Heather teared up, not knowing what to do as Evie scrambled to cling to her and weep. Waves crashing distantly.

"I tried to stop it. I did." Evie crumbled there. Steve, the most confused, ran out and returned with a makeshift ice pack from the freezer. Wrapping it in a rag after dropping Blue on her desk.

"She needs ice, here." Steve joined Heather. Smoothed Evie's hair, but she flinched. "Sorry." He touched the ice to her right eye. Winced. Helped Heather calm her down because she was gasping at that point, near a panic attack.

Billy went dead silent. Staring at Evie's face with a hard, distant expression. Thought he might implode. Teeth crushed and one muscle in his jaw gave a twitch.

Breathe.

"Evie." He pushed out smoother and licked his lips. "Did he do this to you?"

"Who?" Heather turned. Billy ignored her.

"Evie. Look at me." The tame order had her eyes shifting, laced in shame. "There you are. Good. Stay right here. You don't have to speak. Just nod for me. Yes or no?"

Billy was on his feet the second Evie gave him what he asked for. A single nod. She latched at Heather and cried harder as he went.

"Where are you going?" Heather craned, but Billy stalked out with his keys in hand. Hard steps. Steve went after him on instinct.

Evie just wept, out poured all the pent up emotion she bottled.

"Honey, who did this?" Heather tried again.

The door slammed.

"F-Fredrick." She burst out.

"Fr... Our teacher?"

"I-I've been sleeping with him. I was so stupid, Heath. So damn stupid. I thought he loved me. For a while. I tried to stop it. I tried to stop him. He wouldn't let me just go. I wanted it to stop. I'm sorry."

Pieces fell together. Why Evie closed off to her best friend.

"Don't be sorry, I got you. Lie down." Heather just got into the bed with her, shoes kicking off. Let Evie sob into her chest while trying to ice her eye. "I'm here. You're not stupid, I got you."

Outside, Billy was getting into his car.

"Man, what are you doing?" Steve shoved into the passenger side. "Who did that?"

"Bowers." Billy started the engine. Seeing all red and contained still. Eyes front. A mission. "Get the fuck out."

“Bowers? Our teacher, you mean they...” Steve connected some dots. “Oh, fuck.”

“Get out of my car.”

“No, I’m going with you.”

Billy jerked the vehicle to speed off. Steve buckled himself in.

“I think I know what street this guy is on, look for the orange Plymouth.” Billy barely stopped at a red light and continued on. Dead set. About to tear this damn town to shreds. Steve watched him grip the wheel. Knuckles paling.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m gonna make him stop.” Billy skidded and saw it. “There you are, fucker.” He rolled up to the house. Steve scrambled to get out and follow him, looking around the empty neighborhood.

“Hey, man, you’re not going to...”

“Just gonna make him stop.” Billy said again. Not really listening. He saw Evie in his mind again. Thought of his mother. Fists clenched before he smashed the doorbell.

Fredrick cracked it open.

“Mr. Har-” Two hands shoved forward into the house. Billy was noticeably shorter than Bowers, but the way he grabbed his already torn shirt and shoved him into the floor distracted from that.

A punch sweltered. Burst knuckles red. Billy was hellbent. Ready to combust into flames. Steve turned and shut the door behind them.

“Ack! What’s this about?” Fredrick slapped a hand to his nose. “Get out!”

“You beat the shit out of her.” Billy stood over him. Dangerous.

“I have no idea-”

"I already know about you. She didn't tell me either. Figured it out on my own, man, you're not slick. You think those other burnouts you're teaching won't notice, too?" Billy crept up with determined steps. "Are you fucking any other kids?"

"I-"

"Yes or no!" Billy roared in his face. Steve stepped up behind him with huge eyes. Only able to watch. Fredrick about shit himself.

"No...no." He swallowed. "Are you...?"

"Not gonna tell anyone. You and I, we're going to forget this ever happened." Billy undid his belt. Not even here anymore. "You're going to learn a lesson, teach. Respect. Responsibility."

"If you leave now-"

"You take any pictures or videos of her? Tell me or I'll tear this place apart finding them."

"N-No...never. She wouldn't let me."

"You sick piece of shit." It was Steve who voiced that before Billy could, although he looked nauseous.

The belt slid out of its loops. Fredrick glowered at him. Clearly fearful. Not getting up.

"You're going to forget, Evangeline Fenny. Hear me? You're going to pack up tonight and get the fuck out of town. Transfer. Don't crawl back to your fucking wife. You're going to hole yourself up and live your life and you're not going to fuck anymore kids. Nod."

Slowly, Bowers obeyed.

Billy looped the belt. Slashed it through the air. An ugly twack into Bower's eye cracked. Steve wondered about stopping him, but didn't. Barely flinched when he watched it happen. Billy snarled and hit the older man until he turned over to avoid it. Blood bursting from his nose still. Cowering like a bitch.

"You're not gonna see her!" Billy raged and descended down. Brutal slaps like the ones Neil dealt him and his mother. "You're not gonna think about her! You're not gonna touch her! Ever again! Fucking disappear!"

Billy kicked Bower's in the ribs. Left him there gasping.

"Okay, okay! Just don't...ngh...*please*." He whimpered. Billy, still baring his teeth, paused. Hit him a final time with the metal end. Vibrated so hard. Saw Neil there cowering when he blinked. Saw Neil also in the reflection of a fallen mirror that cracked.

"Pack up tonight. Don't make me do this again. No, goodbye. No, nothing. Just fuck off and never come back or I'll fucking kill you. Hear me? I'll kill you for what you did to her! She's *dead* and she's not coming back because of you!"

His voice cracked. So hot, he might breathe smoke. Eyes watering.

Steve was in front of Billy now, pushing him back into the door. Soothing.

"Hey, man. We gotta go. He got the message. Let's go..." Steve caught Billy's face and realized the boy was crying.

"Don't let me catch you in this town again." Billy spat all the way out, skidding and intent on Bowers' beaten frame. Steve started yanking him back to the car.

"Hey, Billy, I-"

"Please." Billy sniffled to get a hold of himself. "Please, don't." Steve looked at him and did the only kindness Billy would allow. He peered aside to let the boy wipe his eyes.

They nearly hit the mailbox screeching out. Back to Evie's where they found Heather in the kitchen brewing some jasmine tea.

"She told me everything." Heather looked like she'd been crying too. Eyes fell to Billy's knuckles as he did his belt again. "Can you go sit with her a bit? First aid kit is on the bed. She won't let me..."

Billy passed and Steve went into the kitchen. Evie sat at her desk now. Battered. Hoodie on the floor. Eyes unblinking and dry. Expressionless. A needle felting project in hand. Deftly stabbing a mass of grey wool into a shape. Billy stole a chair and got close, sat in it backwards and opened the kit on her desk.

“You gonna let me take you to the hospital?”

“No.”

One exhale out his nose showed he didn’t approve. Doctors prodding was the last thing Evie needed. Especially with her eating habits.

"You feel dizzy?"

"No."

“Let’s get you cleaned up, then. Don’t mean to brag, but I know my way around a first aid kit.”

Evie kept stabbing. Coolly. Eyes flicked to his knuckles. Burnt red from the few punches he tossed between swipes of the belt.

She missed her project and pricked her thumb. Cringed to hiss before Billy snatched her hand. Pressed a cotton ball to let the bead of blood dry.

Brown eyes lifted to his face. Almost dewy and angelic. No rage left while he brought her finger up to kiss the pad a few times. Lashes batting and fanned thick. So beautiful. Billy panned to focus on her now looking at him.

He went through the kit and reached for her chin. Tilted Evie so he could clean up the dried blood on her brow and lip. She just watched Billy squint and study her in turn.

“He’s not going to be a problem anymore.” Came a distant sigh. Something he never got to say to his mother. “You’re safe now.” Billy ruffled her curls. Felt gingerly for more damage. A small knot on the back of her skull.

"Can I have another ice pack?" Evie asked at last. She lifted her shirt to flash some nasty bruising on her ribs. Unashamed of her stomach that wasn't flat. Billy got up to retrieve some at the same time Heather brought the tea in.

"Can we stay over tonight with you?" She sat down. "Steve and I can make a food run. Pick up lots of ice cream and just watch some TV together." Fingers tucked a couple dark curls aside.

"I'd like that." Evie beamed a little. "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"I didn't tell you about him."

"You were scared. I get it. I'm not mad. You don't have to hide things. Don't worry about it right now." Heather swept down to embrace her friend. Evie peered at Steve and smiled.

"Bring it in, Steve." She gestured so he gave them both a bear hug. "Thanks, guys."

"You gonna be okay for a bit with Billy?" Heather pulled out so Evie just nodded. Shoulders dropping as they left. Billy moved around them and came to offer the ice pack. She hissed, pressing it down with her project in the other hand.

"I made Bourbon's face from felt a couple years ago. Figured I'd make one for Blue, too." She set it aside and avoided his stare for a moment. "They look worse than they are."

"Liar." He said. "I'd know."

Evie licked her lips. Frowned at the table.

"Hey." Billy spoke and Evie only sighed, eyes lifting to his fatigued expression.

"Hi."

"Name's Billy. Just moved here from Cali." He continued, eyes rolling when she looked confused. "What I should have said when we

met.”

“Ah. Name’s Evangeline. Evie for short. Welcome to Indiana.” She sat back.

“Evangeline.” He sounded out, smirking. “Is that a poem?”

“Oh, yeah, a totally depressing one.” Evie chuckled there, wincing noticeably. Billy crossed his arms on her desk. Leaned forward.

“Shame. That’s a nice New Orleans twang you have.”

She tried hard not to smile at that. One cheek sucked in.

"Don't know what you mean."

They studied each other again. Cheap colored lights around her room gave it a too pretty glow.

“So, do you want to go out?” She asked out of the blue. Billy gaped a little. Processed what she said. Even got up to look around. “What?”

“Just making sure you’re talking to me.” Billy peered outside. Sat down again to point at his chest. “You hit your head a little too hard or something?”

“I bought a new shirt for you.”

"That sounds serious, Evie." He earned a push for that. Licked his lips to smile brighter.

"And I just figured we could hang out later. While I don't...look like this." Evie tucked some hair aside.

“You’re still...” Billy trailed off. *Pretty*. She blushed under all the discoloring. Tone shifting.

“Did you hurt him bad?”

“He can still walk.” A beat. “He’s gonna leave you alone. I made him stop. Hear me?” Billy had to keep saying it. He saved her. He

stopped the monster. Evie welled at him. Actually touched his hand to squeeze it.

“Can...Can you guys...maybe not leave me alone this week?” Evie plucked up some wool to twist it around. It wasn’t just Fredrick. She didn’t feel safe with her thoughts and all these sharp objects either.

“Have I left you alone since New Years, Evie?” Billy cracked a grin that illuminated her expression.

“True.” She rubbed her head. In obvious pain.

Billy got up again to go. Shifted through a medicine cabinet. Pills, liquid meds, vitamins, and more first aid necessities.

A plastic container caught his eye. Full of push pins with red plastic toppers. Like cherry candies. Something that should’ve been in an office desk, not a teen’s bathroom. Strange.

Billy pushed it aside. Filled a glass with water and plucked up some pills.

“Hey, you should take something. Your head will thank you. Drink all the water.” He clicked the glass down. Eyes passed Evie to see the closer bookcase. Full of trinkets. Sparkling rocks and gemstones. Broken pieces of ceramic dancers from odd collectables. Pointing things. Keys. Neatly organized and lined up.

“Heather’s getting food, but I might...put my head down.” She drank and swallowed two pills. Scooped up Blue while she pawed at her ankle. Billy edged to leave. “Hey, you...” He came to full attention, turning. “You don’t have to leave...”

Billy was in front of her lightning quick. Evie didn’t flinch when their eyes locked together.

“Yeah?”

“I want you to stay.” Came the admission. Unafraid of him and his steel knuckles beginning to rust. Evie just stared without cringing.

Not even as his fingers trailed up her jawline. Gingerly over a

bruise there. His thumb drew a gentle circle next to it. Such a contrast to Billy. So natural too.

Evie let him observe her wounds. Finger pad tracing that swollen mouth to tip her chin. Lips touched her brow. A moon crescent trail of soft kisses. He pecked her jaw next. Then, found her lips for a vaguely rustic kiss.

She tilted to open a little. Deepened in without regret. Fingers combed her messy curls back before he leaned out. Bright eyes glinting.

“Our worst kiss yet.” Evie mused, Blue clutched to her torso.

“Oh, yeah. Terrible.” He hitched, entertained. Evie searched him and let Blue crawl over her bed.

“Gonna change into something comfier.” She waited until Billy gave her a moment. Evie pulled on a sports bra and color block print shirt with long sleeves that went almost to her knees. Fluffy blue socks were a must. She drank more water and poked her head out. “Coming?”

Billy didn’t need to be told twice.

“I’ll stay up. Wait for the others to get home.” He yawned as Evie got into bed. Fiddling with her sleeves.

“Can you lie down with me for a bit? Just until I fall asleep. No pressure.” She perked when he unbuttoned his shirt. Kicked jeans aside and stood there in a white tank and briefs. Stunning without really trying. The metallic chain around his neck caught the moonlight before she shut the lamp off.

“Scoot.” Billy slid in next to her. Blue wandered and got comfortable on a pillow above them. Evie had no qualms nestling into him. Tucking into his side where she felt safe between him and the wall.

Billy’s body warmed her instantly. The cologne and wash spirited her into a dream. Evie settled her head on his chest and shifted one loose arm over his hard frame. Flush with curves that fit into him

perfectly.

He tried to reason she was just scared and drained. Fingertips danced up her spine as Billy stared at the ceiling. Evie touched his wrist and got a better look at his knuckles. Kissed them better. Felt Billy's chest sink and still.

"Thank you..." Evie closed her eyes.

No reply followed. Same as the night before, she let herself tumble and fall. Less shame this hour. Billy sniffled and exhaled. Tried to stay awake while Evie's breath evened out.

Heather found them upon returning. Pushed the door back to see Billy's head tilted aside. Snoring. Evie burrowed into his torso with one arm draped over him. Steve smiled a little, eyes rolling.

"Unbelievable."

"Let's get this stuff in the fridge and set up camp in the living room." Heather hushed him, closing the door to let them rest.

The hours rolled until Billy roused to some rustling at six in the morning.

Bleary eyes cracked to an auroral outline. Evie perched on the floor at the end of the bed with the desk lamp pulled over. Couple notebooks spread out as she marked down some words and mimed them on her guitar. Mouthing to herself, barely making sound. Blue teetered across the papers to wriggle into her lap. Frizzy curls half piled atop her crown.

Blue eyes trailed over the back of her bare neck. Thought about pushing his lips there and chided himself. Billy shifted and her head snapped. Quick hands set the guitar aside, back in its stand.

"Sorry. I found a chorus at five and had to write it down before I..." She scribbled her lyrics and smacked a notebook shut. Billy rubbed his stomach and yawned. Heard her say something that stuck with him. "Sometimes I think I write songs like I don't have any time left."

“Don’t stop on my account.” He paused as Evie rose. The lamp in her grip like an old candle. Bathing her face. Violet kisses around her poor reddened eye. Evie thought of a flickering candle stick too and how wax would look dripping down against his illuminated, marble skin.

Noticing him staring, Evie clicked the light off and set it aside.

For a moment, she stood there in the dark fiddling with her sleeves. Fingers pulled a scrunchie out and tossed it on the desk. Billy reclined to stare at the ceiling.

“It’s your bed.” He quipped so she crossed and crawled up between him and the wall again. Evie got very still and faced away.

“One hour. The most lyrics I’ve sat down and punched out in...feels like months. It was always hard to get words out when I was dwelling on Fredrick. So much for fucking an English teacher. He liked it as a hobby and nothing more...”

“He’s an asshole.”

“He wasn’t always. Not to me. Maybe that’s twisted. He did help me...he did. Even if that was him trying to feed his own ego.”

“Shouldn’t do this. Trip down memory lane will only sting.” Billy exhaled. “You might even like it.”

Evie decided to hurt.

“Sometimes I’d wrap my arms around him in the shower and sing little songs in his ear. He loved that shit.” Evie turned over to see Billy already looking in her direction. Barely there ounces of blue light glimmered from outside. “He gave me such lovely kisses. We used to joke a lot, back when it was fun. Dancing and wrestling around.”

“You’re better off.”

“I know that, I wished I believed it though. In full. I don’t love him. I know that. But, it’s still hard not to feel something. I don’t think he had a very good childhood and missed out on it.”

"Taking yours is no excuse." Billy got hard about that.

"It's not fair. To still...feel any kind of way about a person who hurts you. You can't just turn it off and that's..." Evie sniffed and sucked her cheeks in. "I don't know how to live with that."

"You just do." Billy rubbed his eyes with one hand. Drowsy and alert with her next to him. Both of them entombed in sweet amber.

"He used to bring me gifts. Little things like what I collected. The antique looking brooches he found were my favorite. These little inklings that reminded me I was thought of. Desired. He bought me lacy things too. I still have Fredrick in a little box hidden in my top drawer. My gift wrapped naughty secret I used to love." Evie scoffed at herself. "I don't know what I'm saying."

"Clearly have words." Billy sounded out in the dark. Seeming too wise for his youthful beauty. Gold curls slipping over silky pillows. Lashes batting as he turned to see the shine of her eyes. Evie settled in and gripped her own pillow, sighing out.

"It was so innocent when it started. It really was. I don't think he picked me, not until much later. Not until I was already his. He didn't act on these...urges. Maybe I pushed him." Her lip quivered.

"You didn't."

"We had these lingering after school talks that started to last the hour. One day there was an awful storm and I only had my bike. We both were soaked and he just smiled. He felt bad for keeping me. I remember the crack of thunder because it sent me into his arms. He only hugged me and I needed it so bad because sometimes you just need to be held."

Billy just listened well.

"I don't know why it does that to me. Scares me like I think I might die, I'm willing to brave bigger monsters to get away from it. Fredrick offered me a ride and we got into the car sopping wet. Dripping all down my lips and chin. He turned on the engine and...had this funny look, you know, like he knew I wasn't supposed to be there with the

rain dripping from my hair and cheeks.”

“You weren’t.”

“And he looked so beautiful. Never seen his hair a mess. I smiled. And he smiled. We laughed at it because we both felt it. And then he kissed me... Afterward, I asked him to fuck me and he said, no. Just drove me home.”

Blue eyes studied Evie too close.

“I started crying softly like a little baby. Asking what I did wrong...asking why he had to go and kiss me in the first place. God, it was so embarrassing. I was mortified.” Evie huffed to herself. “We didn’t look at each other for a week after that. I skipped his class because I was so upset and he found me in the library after school...”

She paused to exhale.

“...He couldn’t say anything like suddenly he was the nervous one. Just dropped a note down and practically raced for the hills. Named a motel, date, and time. And I showed up... He seemed surprised I did.”

“And he...?”

“No, we drove a ways away to some bar that didn’t card. Had a beer in this messy roadhouse. Got tipsy and I laughed at something silly and touched his knee. Fredrick said I made him hard and then when I didn’t believe it, he took my hand and pressed it... Fuck, I never wanted anyone that bad, you know? It was like no one thought about sex as much as I did.”

“That’s just being a teen, Angel.” Billy’s lip twitched and she nodded.

“Yeah. We fell asleep holding each other. Didn’t have sex until the next week at his place. We had fun together and he used to read me to sleep every night we spent. Fredrick nurtured me and he fucked me so good. Being with him, I wanted the sun to stay up all day for the first time...and when it went down, I wasn’t afraid.”

Her final sentiments shook his core apart.

"And there was no other man to compete with him." Evie said. "I was never going to win."

"I wanted to kill him, you know?" Billy trembled, fingers twisting the fabric of his shirt around. "Looked at him and saw my dad there and I thought... I felt powerful after. I would go back and finish the job right now if I could, Evie, I felt so fucking great while he cried. I wonder if that's how my dad feels when he..."

"You're not Neil."

"No, but I might be worse. Didn't stop my dad, I just became him to cope. To understand it and I still...fuck, I still don't."

"I don't think you're worse."

"You don't know that, Evie." Billy tried to be mean when he said it. Left her undaunted.

"I do know you. Well enough now." Evie let herself touch him. Billy shuddered when her fingers shifted over his tense fist.

"I didn't push you around cause I liked you. Guys don't really do that. I hated you, Evie." He welled at her, eyes locking. "Just cause you saw things. Cause you're strange. Cause you have a mother."

"I hated you, too." She offered that lovely as can be. Billy sniffled and flashed a smile in the dark with watery eyes. Laid there staring into space as she studied him.

"You wanna sing me something?" He'd asked in a strange tone. This inkling of reluctance.

"Now?"

"Yeah, something soft so we don't wake the house," Billy explained with the same hesitant armor over his flesh, "like a lullaby."

"What do you want to hear?"

"What's that song you're always humming in school?"

"Oh, the Irma Thomas one." Evie swallowed to breathe and tucked into him, arms pulled to her chest. "You get a single verse."

"That's enough," Billy turned to see her blush, "for now, Evangeline."

"It's weird with you so close."

"I'll shut my eyes." He let his lashes flutter. "You can just sing me to sleep." A beat of Evie shifting into him. Searching. She came up on her elbows and Billy stretched his arm out for her.

"I know..." She took a moment to find her voice again. Smoothed it back out to silk. *"I know to ever let you go. Oh, it's more than I could ever stand..."*

Billy's breath hitched when she lowered back into him. Head on his shoulder. Rich and gentle near his ear. Singing too sweetly, he vibrated.

"Oh, but anyone," Evie touched his face to tuck some locks of hair aside, *"who knows what love is..."*

She never finished. Billy kept his eyes shut. Stayed there reclined looking like Eros himself. Angelic and too beautiful to be apart of this world. Nestled on a pair of ethereal, feather wings. She imagined being Psyche and lying with him. Those glowy wings curling around them both for shelter.

Evie pushed up further and caught Billy by surprise kissing him. Just a tender peck upon the cheek. Another at the corner of his lips. Blue eyes opened too late. The bliss of her moved away when his hand came up then dropped. Deciding not to push it.

"How'd I do?"

Billy could have said a number of things.

About how her voice fills the edges around him and he's not afraid to succumb for the first time. About how she makes him feel things

he hasn't in a long while. About how she's a swell of magnificent fire in this winter. About how being with Evie reminds him how much people can mean to each other. Even if it makes him upset, remembering; because it's so raw. He's willing to touch it again because of her glimmer.

About how he wants to be a better version of himself and help Evie see herself as he does. About how she's burning and molten and neon and painted and free when she sings. And beautiful. And he wants more bad kisses. More of her. About how she's so much and she's absolutely *enough* and she deserves to feel that. To be still and burn with soft embers for once while the moon and stars twinkle kindly for her. About how there's a fire hiding behind her heart emitting a lovely glow that only he can see.

About how his heart burns there, too.

But, Billy turned to see Evie's glittering eyes and replied delicately.

"Fine." He said, chest shuddering because it wasn't enough to capture her spark. Evie only beamed. Like maybe she felt the warmth of his flames even still.

No more words could be spoken. Evie settled back into him and tried to resume her slumber. They felt Blue pawing to climb up and make her usual perch on the pillows. Billy stayed stiff as a board to allow her to fall. Felt the warmth on his face where her lips grazed.

That red hot kiss rocked him back under the water.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks all again for being wonderful and please chat with me if you have the time. My tumblr is Alias-B also! 🐼 XOXO

12. Cupid And Psyche

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! Billy and Evie continue their strange mating ritual. TW: Mentions of past abuse and student/teacher relationship. Heavy petting. Phone sex. ;)

Evie groaned the next time she woke.

Pain blared like the morning sun streaming on her face. Flames licking supple cheeks.

Billy gone in the bed upon turning over.

His scent apparent all over her damn sheets. Seeped into the pillows. *Aramis*. Hairspray. *Paco Rabanne Pour Homme*. Evie wondered if Billy liked to leave parts of himself where he goes. An impression similar to hands in wet concrete.

Sometimes a warm body pressed up against you was the only thing reminding you that you were here.

She curled around his pillow to inhale. Felt butterflies flutter her stomach. Landing on delicate organs to decorate them in jewel toned wings. Iridescent glows that washed harsh reds away.

Evie wondered what it would be like to crystallize. Utterly.

Feet touched the floor to leave such fantasies aside. Those butterflies decayed upon seeing her face in the mirror. Hissing, fingertips gingerly touched the skin on fire. Upset welts around her puffy eye. Lungs gave a shudder before Evie was scrambling to replace the emptiness.

Needy fingers went for her drawer and pulled out a box labeled “*FB + EF*.” Pushed all the way in back hidden under sheer and lacy panties. Hands clicked around the little pieces of jewelry she wasn’t able to wear in the open until she lifted a brooch to the light. A sparkling ladybug.

Fredrick got for her during the first month of that magical summer. They went to some dirty adult party three cities away where people in their twenties and thirties were doing cocaine out in the open. Evie shared a tab of acid with Fredrick that unlocked her entire psyche. Draped herself into him to watch colors spin along the TV. Felt his hand palm her breast before they found a room.

“Do you think I’m fat?” Evie asked between kisses, coming down from her trip and sweltering with heat. Trembling too hard.

“What?” He actually laughed into her mouth, came out and pulled her body flush. “You’re not fat, love, you’re so beautiful.”

At the time, Evie wasn’t sure how that answer made her feel worse.

But, the lady bug pin was now scuttling into her stomach. She nearly broke the drawer with her clenched fists pushing it down.

Exhale.

Oh, how she moaned like a wanting slut that night. Rode Fredrick hard and turned over afterward for him. Started to cry when he tried to take her home afterwards because she didn’t want to go.

Didn't want the dreaming to end. She wanted to stay wrapped up in him forever.

It was their first fight. He screamed she was being a child and manipulating him. They both shouted about telling her mother the truth.

Evie really started to sob that she hated him and he just held her wrists and kissed her deeply. Softened suddenly as she fell into his arms. Told her she was too pretty to be so upset. That she had a hold on him. That he was starting to fall deeply and madly in love with her.

And that made her feel like a god.

They ended up back at his place. Evie got home the next day to Mona hiding her pack of smokes behind a picture of Dolly Parton.

Not asking where her daughter had been all night. Just said to get ready for her next talent show.

Hungover, Evie still won the prize money that went into some new clothes, her future fund, and fresh paint for the salon. Talent scouts cooed to keep growing.

“Evie!” A knock startled her daydreams. The drawer smacked shut. Heather poked her face in and frowned. “Oh, honey...you need some more ice on that. We made pancakes.”

“We?”

“Steve and I. Billy went home to shower, he had to give Max a ride somewhere. Come on, eat some breakfast.”

Evie changed, rubbing her throat on the way out. Steve blinked at her and tried not to wince.

“I know it’s not pretty.” Evie pressed her lips.

“You saw me after Hargrove kicked my ass.” Steve reached over the little island counter to give her chin this encouraging tap. Darling smile curling. Heather put a big plate down so Evie slid onto a stool.

“Thanks, sorry I passed out last night.”

“Ice cream will be a good pick me up later.” Heather kissed Evie’s good side. “Want us to stick around today?”

“Ah, we can hang out tonight. I gotta clean up and I wanted to go talk to Billy about something.” Evie took a bite and sighed. Steve and Heather exchanged looks. “Nothing happened. Perverts.”

A beat before laughter erupted. It felt so needed this hour

** ** *

Evie tried to use makeup to cover the easier welts. Felt useless with her eye socket the size and color of Jupiter. A huff before she flicked a brush aside and stood. She left Blue on the couch before venturing out. Frost and slush marked the unforgiving winter outside. Evie had

waited until Neil's car left and crossed over. Knocked.

Susan poked her head out.

"Oh, Evie, I... Dear, what happened?" Susan's wedding ring caught the light as she touched her lips with worry. Red hair piled up upon her head and a sea foam sweater dress.

"I slipped on the ice." Lashes batted. "Sorry, I caught you in the middle of something."

"No, I was unpacking the last few boxes in our garage. Shifting some furniture. Think we're finally moved in. I was just going to change and catch the bus, our shelves are bare." Susan held the door back.

"I was here to see Billy, is he...?" Evie trailed off when she heard it. The blasting music from the farthest bedroom. Shut tight.

"Yes, in his room. Evie, he's... He's in a mood and might not come out."

"A mood?" Evie studied the woman. Thin hands clasping so hard that they paled.

"Maybe a friendly face will be good." Susan decided, not convinced but too polite to turn Evie away now. "Go on ahead."

It appeared Max was out with friends. Susan disappeared into the kitchen after gesturing so Evie crossed down the hallway. Knocked and wasn't heard. Pounded harder.

"I'm busy, Susan!" Came the bark.

"Not Susan." Evie shot right back. There was a curse before some scrambling and the door yanked open. Billy in a white tank tucked into some jeans with grey socks. Lax. Chain shifting as he breathed. "You look real busy."

Eyes screwed up at her. Seemingly irritated.

"What are you doing here?"

"You left, I just...wanted to hang out. Talk, I mean." Her feet shuffled before she matched his taller posture. Chin lifting.

"Getting clingy on me."

"As if you have any business talking about that." She joked, arms crossing.

"I spent the night in your bed. We shot the shit, I'm not your boyfriend." His clipped tone etched some surprise over Evie's face.

"Okay, asshole, when and where did I ask if you wanted to be my damn boyfriend? You going to ease up a little bit? I don't need that." Evie flared and he sucked in his cheeks before pulling her into his room and shutting the door. "The fuck is your problem all the sudden?"

Billy had gone to turn the music down a bit, head craning to see her pressed into his door. One of his hands was idly rubbing his ribs. Some of their anger died. A tense expression crossed his face.

Evie realized she'd never really seen the inside of his room. Smelled like Billy. Smoke, hairspray, and cologne. Random plates and beer cans with smashed cigarette buds. A little vanity made of crates. Near empty shelves. Weights laying round. Laundry mostly in a basket propped up in the corner. Curtains that were really clipped up sheets. Something somber about it all. Like nothing was his. Like he had to make the space livable. Bearable.

"I don't plan for guests." He plucked up a pack of cigarettes.

"Bullshit, I see girls climbing in and out of your window." Evie lightened the tension. Billy hitched as if he might chuckle. Felt guilty instead.

"Well, help yourself to a seat." Billy kicked back into a beaten brown couch so Evie nudged her shoes aside and joined him on the other end. "Well?" He lit himself a smoke and scratched his chin, eyes on the window.

"About last night, that stuff I said..."

"Weren't drunk so you can't take it back." The white hot cherry pointed to her.

"I'm just saying," Evie gestured at air, "it was a lot."

"Me beating the fuck out of our second period teacher was a lot." Billy got his cigarette snatched before he plucked it back. "Think of your pretty voice, yeah?"

Evie pouted, made this rumbling sound at him before she sat back.

It clicked in Billy's head.

"You're looking to drown your sorrows. Finally something I can really help with." Billy reached over the couch and came up with a bottle of amber liquid. There was an unmistakable sound of the front door closing, signalling Susan had left.

"Heather and Steve wouldn't approve." Evie took the bottle anyways. Gulped.

"Easy, *jesus*." Billy drank after. One quick swig. Watched her bring her legs up to cross them. Leggings and a thick, violet sweater with wool socks. Curls spilling. "Small drinks, don't be an idiot."

"Strong words from you." She sipped that time. Savored the woody burn as it went down.

"Don't I know it?" He puffed. Evie offered him the bottle and sighed, relaxing before she spoke.

"Did Fredrick cry when you hit him?"

"Like a bitch." Billy exhaled smoke. "Drove past his place after I dropped Max off at her friend's. Cleared the fuck out."

"Oh." It still ached. This person who touched her life was suddenly gone. Maybe never to return. Like her father. It should have been a fucking comfort and instead everything ugly swimming under Evie's skin pushed to the surface.

"Did you like it?" A whisper.

"I always do." He spoke, drank about it. Evie thought back to leveling Tannen's face. Silently agreed. Wondered when he would break his chains to get revenge.

"Do you think I'm fat?" Her tone droned next.

"Why are you asking me stupid questions, Evie?" Billy's cigarette was hanging lazily from his lips. Bold, crystalline eyes appeared bored at her as an arm came up on the couch. She blinked at him.

Evie liked that reply. She was fat. She was pretty, too. She hoped. They can coexist. Billy could just be crass about it. Obscene.

She enjoyed that about him, too. Even if she wouldn't admit it.

"Do you think about fucking me when you masturbate?" She said in the same controlled tone.

Billy choked, almost inhaling his lit stick, and spit it on the floor. Still coughing, his head snapped with bulging eyes. Stepping on the cigarette to kick it under the beaten sofa.

Pride swelled.

"What the fuck, Evie?" He set the liquor aside. Evie was on her feet lightning quick so he got up also. Just as quick. "Hey, why'd you come here?"

She had the door open when his palm smacked it shut. Evie spun there, pressed between him and the wood. Billy breathing into her space. One arm still outstretched. Too intent.

Evie thought for a moment, she heard his pulse begin to race.

Her heavy eyes flashed at him. Waiting there for something to crack.

And then trembling fingers dipped and clicked the lock on the doorknob without breaking eye contact.

This shrewd look crossed his eyes. Filled his whole expression with neon light.

God damn, he was just too beautiful. Stunning like ethereal Cupid about to revive Psyche with true love's kiss after their trials. Wings unfurling all delicate and feathery. They both crystallized.

"I should go." Evie said without trying. Not moving an inch. Billy dropped his arms and stepped back to see her. Flicking his eyes before he let his light burn. Leaned forward and bit the inside of his cheek. A rasp.

"Take your fucking clothes off."

Evie threw herself at him.

Knocked Billy back into the bed while their lips collided. The boy caught fire. He pushed her to turn them over. Already shoving between her legs. So hard, he figured he might blow his load right there. Evie's lips on his neck made it worse. Made him moan until his leg shook like a dog's would.

Yeah, it had been awhile.

"Fuck." Billy pulled up, left Evie pawing for him. Fingers under her sweater to yank.

"Wait." Evie gasped out so he stopped. All her fervor hid under the bed. Unable to meet those eyes.

"What?" Billy sat back on his knees. "Scared I won't like what I see?"

"It's too bright in here." She turned to let the sheets fall over the blinds. Went for the other.

"Leave some light. Wanna see you." Billy batted his lashes as he said that. Made her melt. Quickly, he pulled his own shirt off. Flashed the reason for all this anger earlier. Splotchy bruises along his ribs where Neil's knuckles pushed in for whatever reason he picked that morning.

Evie paused to see them. Saw Billy's rock hard chest sink in. Reached out and got her wrist snatched. Gentle as can be.

“Don’t worry about it.” His eyes averted.

“Don’t worry about mine.” Evie asked so Billy cupped her face and pushed her back into the sheets. She paused only to sit up and remove her top. Covered in fracturing rosy marks across fleshy curves. Before she had a chance to get insecure, Billy cut in.

“Leggings, too.” He winked, snapping the fabric. She scowled instead.

“You first.” Evie undid the loop of his belt, teeth tugging at her bottom lip as she did. Billy felt himself shudder. Stood up so she followed.

They stared at each other. Didn’t touch and undressed there in the too soft lights down to their underwear.

Billy’s eyes followed the swell of her breasts. Everything about Evie was plush. Dark curls hung over her shoulders. Really looked like a twisting goddess from a painting. She had her hands in front of her stomach and dropped them when he crossed. Inching her back into the wall.

A hand cupped her jaw before their lips opened. Arms went around his shoulders. Unafraid that he was looking at her in daylight.

Alive. Both of them felt alive.

Billy pressed further, let their bodies melt together. Tested how she felt against him. Flesh on flesh.

Several sensations erupted the moment his mouth was on her neck. Clouds bursting with rain. Fireworks splashing the night sky. Petals unfurled within Evie’s stomach. Gemstones grew out to crystallize. She wondered how pretty she’d be if Billy took a chisel to her flesh. Cracked the shell open. She ran her hands over his arms and felt the soft hairs there. Pulled him even in closer.

Fingers slid one bra strap down. Evie coaxed him further with digits woven into golden curls. Maybe Billy had a point about her being molten because she was about to spill hot between his fingers.

He came up. Moaned into her mouth. Palms gripping at flesh. Like he had to feel all of her at once. Evie bit her lip, neck craning back so he could inch lower again.

Billy Hargrove is about to fuck me, she could have giggled, and I'm going to fuck him hard and thoughtlessly.

She hitched a gasp just as his fingertips inched into cotton panties. Got ready to pull him back into bed.

Billy's head lifted. The earring dangled almost violently when a door slammed. Evie's dreams were sent scattering before they frozen together. Marble.

Water pouring over red hot iron to elicit the tempering sizzle.

"Fuck." Billy recognized the sound. "Fuck. My dad." He kept saying, pushing Evie's clothing at her. "You need to go. Out the window."

"What?" Evie barely had time to get dressed while he helped her. Both of them bursting at the seams. Billy yanked his jeans up and got the window open. Guided Evie over it as she was still forcing her sweater on.

"Billy!" Came a bark at the front of the house. Stomping followed. Evie plopped into the snowy grass with a groan as Billy dropped her shoes into her lap. Evie scrambled back up around the back of her house. Slammed the door and fell back against it like she had to hide too.

Lungs sputtered.

"What the fuck?" Her cheeks were an obscene cherry shade. She felt Billy all over her. Ached all between her thighs even in wet clothing. Huffed because she was unfucked and her sweater was inside out. "Shit." Evie scrambled to her bedroom. Blue scuttled out to a food dish as Evie jerked the curtain open. Couldn't see anything in Billy's room.

Her phone rang.

“Yes?” A cry into the receiver.

“Cute that you worried for me.” Cool and even. Almost macho.

She puffed, sinking.

“Shut up.”

“Guess my dad’s beer run wasn’t as long as I thought.” Billy blew air out his lips. “Was hoping he’d be working today. They cut his hours down this week for some reason. Made him real fucking happy.”

“Come over here.”

“No, I’m locked in for playing my music too loud and for being disrespectful this morning. Gotta wait till later, he’ll get drunk enough and forget.” Billy reclined on his bed. Something horrible there because he was used to this. Music was playing softer behind him. Mingling with Neil in the living room watching some show play on. “You’re...intense.” His blase attitude and joke almost set Evie at ease. She fell into bed, eyes rolling.

“Uh. So, are you.” A beat. “...Were you surprised?”

“Yeah, actually. I had you figured for a shy, little birdie.”

“Everyone thinks that about me. I sing and dance. I like sex and stage lights. I get mad. I’m not shy. Maybe at times about my...but, I get over it. Women can be as intense as men in the sack, you know?” Evie sounded insulted.

“Don’t worry, I’m a quick learner.” He’d mused. “Learning new things about you every day.”

Evie couldn’t explain why that made her blush. Hard. The silky timbre of his voice lulling her into genuine security.

“Learned that I can make out your accent more when you’re sleepy, on the phone, and in lust.”

“In lust? Shut up.” She mocked. “Don’t have an accent. You

probably can't even tell the uptown and downtown accents apart in *N'awlins*." Ah shit. Billy found that hilarious as Evie cringed.

"That so, *N'awlins*?" Billy countered. "Just say the word, *bayou*, for me."

"...That's a hard pass. Are all Cali boys this insufferable?" She rolled over to swing her legs up.

"We are, actually. But, I am the prettiest." His smile dazzled with no one to admire it. Evie saw it in her mind and wanted to just toss him over town.

"I'll give you that for admitting it." A breath followed. Evie toyed with one of her curls. Tugged. "I had you all shaky there." His tongue clicked.

"No idea what you mean." That cheekiness she enjoyed dripped from his rich tone. "Bummed, I was *this* close to seeing your tits."

"They'll be the same later. I think. I don't know, I always thought they were shaped funny." Brown eyes turned to the ceiling as she rolled back, one arm behind her head.

"Later, she says. Huh. And I'll be the judge of that. I'm a professional and I'm not picky. Any shape is good, I'm in this for the taste."

"Sleaze." Evie pouted and a chuckle sounded. Billy sighed. "How'd you get my number, by the way?"

"Begged it from Heather on my way out. I can be smooth." He said. "You really want me over tonight? Steve and Heather won't approve, am I right?"

She let out an aggravated sigh and Billy smiled again to himself. Imagined that scrunchy pout she liked to make. Fingers tapping his bare stomach.

"I mean, we can...hang out. Nothing wrong with that."

"Like you came over just now to hang out, chica?"

"I didn't come over just for that."

"Sure. As if you also didn't wet your blue panties for me."

"You're so gross." Evie rubbed her legs together. Remembered his hands worshipping her flesh. Her flesh that she was conditioned to hate. Adjusted the phone and licked her lips. "Don't make me regret this."

"I'm just saying we can easily pick up where we left off, Evie." The name rolled sinfully from his tongue. She swallowed. Flashes of Billy across her brain. His peachy tanned skin. His gold curls. His lips kissing her.

"Remind me where that was? Landed pretty hard there when you pushed me out the window."

"Shit, yeah. About that-"

"I get it." Evie didn't need to make him explain. "I didn't land on my head. Still raw from..." Where Fredrick tossed her into the wall. They both went silent. Just listened to each other breathe. Evie gave this dreamy sigh. "I like...your arm hair and I like the way you smell."

He laughed.

"You're a funny girl, Evie."

"It's just...that intensity you have, I don't know. You are pretty." She rubbed her face. "I don't know what I'm saying."

"Your perfume goes right to my dick. You know that, too." His joke lightened them both again. Evie rolled her eyes. "Explains why you practically crawl into my skin at night." Billy remembered suddenly that he'd spent two nights with Evie and hadn't screwed her. That was a rarity.

"You snore a little. Couple of grunts. Sorta adorable."

"Don't even get my started on how dead silent you get." Billy's eyes trailed over his room. He could still smell her honey amber scent

lingering. Hummed into the pillow. *Obsession* by Calvin Klein. Odd scent for a teen, but matching him in intensity and she wore it so subtly. All they could do was battle and weave together. *Obsession* and *Aramis*. This strange dance he was thrilled to continue.

“Never answered my question.”

“Already forgot it. Was it where we left off or what I’d do to you next?” Lips curled as her breath hitched. “Let’s see. I had you against the wall. Moaning so pretty. Lipstick smeared.”

Evie almost didn’t speak up when he paused before...

“And?”

“And I was gonna keep kissing down your tits. Get the rest of your clothes off. Tongue my way over your sweet nipples. Stomach too, I like to cover all the ground I can. See how shy you really are.” He licked his lips and Evie’s eyes got heavy.

“Not so shy when I tell you to keep going.”

“No, I guess not. Not until I push your sensitive thighs open, I bet you’d quake and purr. Blush like you clearly are now.”

Evie realized she’d been holding her breath. Didn’t even fight him. Clutching her sweater as he spoke so casually.

“It’s a real fucking tragedy. Me, waiting longer before I find out how you taste. That’s all I’m saying.” Billy’s breath was labored on the other end. “Still with me here, Angel?”

“Is...this your private line?”

Another snicker.

“Obviously. Why?” Billy had his jeans open. Bit his lip while he pooled arousal around his tip. Watched it trickle down into his stomach. Again. No reply. “Answer was yes, by the way... What you asked early if I thought about you. I do a lot. Fucking you. Eating you out. I knew you were a hair puller, we have that in common.”

“Not sure I trust you to last and get the job done with how worked up you get. All the trembling, it was kinda cute.”

“You clearly haven’t ridden my tongue.”

Fuck him.

“You have to actually stop talking to do that, Billy.” Evie laughed in the open and Billy smiled brighter, eyes crinkling. He walked into that one. Idly, she ran her fingers up her thigh. “Between you and I, I never let guys eat me out.”

Billy stopped to sit up.

“No shit?”

“It always made me nervous so I stopped them when they tried. All the mouth action comes from me.” Evie had sat up on the other end too. “I’m pretty good actually.”

“You’d let me fuck that beautiful mouth after I taste you?” He’d cooed. “Betcha that lipstick won’t look half bad on my skin since you never did start buying waterproof.”

“I guess it’s only fair.” Evie dropped her tone. “Still think you can’t handle it.”

“There’s the ego I was hoping for.” He shook his head. “But, I have to say, sweetheart, you’re missing out. That’s the real crime, not letting yourself get tongue fucked once in a while. Do you not know how to treat yourself?”

Evie mashed her face into the nearest pillow.

“I can’t stand you. I shouldn’t have said anything.” She muffled and Billy only laughed again, laying down. Imagined how cherry her lips and cheeks must have looked. Thought about tracing his thumb over her wet mouth. Smearred in slick red.

“Don’t get shy on me now. We established you weren’t.”

“It’s weird.”

“Not weird. You just let a guy kiss down and nature takes over.”

“It’s not that simple with me.”

“Sure, it is. Let me walk you through it. Take your leggings and panties off.” He licked his lips. “C’mon, we got time to kill now.” There was some shuffling.

“It’s not a big deal,” Evie undressed anyways, “it’s just...I think about the angle and guys looking up and seeing my stomach and I get freaked out.”

“Sweetheart, my mouth will be buried in your pussy, I ain’t worried about your flesh. I’m more worried about my technique. These things you get so worked up about. Guys really don’t give a shit, the good ones anyways.” His vulgarity sent these fizzles all down her nerves. Actually made her feel better. “You just...tip your head back and enjoy it. Although, I don’t mind a little praise and eye contact. Make me feel like a good boy for once.”

“And I can’t like...play with myself to help?”

“You can, but just relax and let me take over. You can trust me to make you feel good, Evie. Might be nice to give up some control.”

He had no idea that he’d hit a nail on the head.

“So, kisses. Thighs open.” Evie settled into the pillows, free hand twisted into fabric with a cool breeze on her thighs. Breasts rising. “Would you use your fingers too?”

“If you ask me sweetly.” Billy saw beads of precum all over his abdomen. Throbbled and tried not to grunt. “I’d like to. I’d like to lick my way inside you. Hold your legs open and kiss your clit until you’re begging for more. Love the view of you. Spread open and wet for me. Like how you feel.”

“You’ve never been with a girl my size.” Evie broke into his daydreams.

“You don’t know that.” He paused. It was true.

“Yes, I do, Billy.” Evie didn’t know why the thought was stark and gnawing. “I’m bigger than you. Wider. Maybe even heavier.”

“Bet, I can lift you just fine.” He rubbed his face, eyes searching. “I liked it. Touching you. I wasn’t shy about it, was I? Fucking soft. I’m not used to that against me. You’re warm and when I squeezed you against me, I wanted to throw you on my bed so fucking bad. Can’t explain it.”

She went silent so he found a joke.

“If it makes you so nervous, I promise to let you suck me off after.”

“A dashing gentleman if I ever saw one.” She broke out of the nerves.

“Just think about it, Evie. You ever just take the time to appreciate how wet you made someone? Up close. It’s a thrill.” Billy hitched as he palmed himself. Evie swallowed a lump.

“Are you...?”

“Am I, what?” Billy’s labored breathing made it obvious, but he wanted her to say it.

“Did I make you wet?”

“Jeans are ruined for the day.” He offered, husky under the music. “Should have risked hiding you in the closet.”

“We would have so been caught.”

“His problem.” Billy gruffed, changed the subject to work himself up. “Two clasps away from those tits. I won’t forget that.”

“Maybe I’ll play with them since you’re not here to.” She moved a hand under her sweater and Billy outright groaned.

“What do you taste like?”

“I recall you predicting heaven.” Sarcasm etched out. “It’s possible you’ll find out if I’m in the mood again. I could be just now realizing

this was a lapse in judgement.”

“Ah huh.” Billy gave himself a few strokes. Evie listened to him sigh too soft and husky in her ear. Pictured him atop her. Rock hard and moaning. Gorgeous like Apollo. Sun streaming upon his back. Illuminating curls.

She slid her fingers down. Hitched a sigh because she was soaked and aching.

“Would you kiss me after I sucked you off?” Evie played with herself. Let him hear the moan.

“With tongue. You could spit directly into my mouth for all I care. In fact, I might like that.” Billy hummed, tone changing to give an order. “Slip your fingers in if you haven’t already. I know what you’re doing, Evangeline.”

“You were doing it first.” Evie’s head pressed back into the pillows. She spread her legs and drew circles into herself, pressed two fingers in and moaned.

“Who’s fucking you right now, Angel?”

“Oh, you.” She was forward about that. Heart thumping. “Want your mouth and hands.”

“Told you.” His head tilted back. Tried to stay immersed in the lingering scent of her. “Play with your clit again. That’ll do until I get my tongue on you.”

Evie cursed that time. Accent lacing her tone. It made him smile brighter.

“If I had it my way, you won’t play with yourself at all. Know that? You want to get off, you just come to me and let me take care of you.”

“What a chore.” Evie sped and started to rock into her own touch.

“I’m always up to the task.”

Billy worked himself on the other end to every little mewl and sigh. Dirty talk went out the window as she gasped. Started to build herself up. Pictured Billy slicked and surrendered against cotton sheets. Stunning and batting his lashes while he opened his mouth and pumped his fist.

“Get yourself there, Angel, don’t wait for me.” He heard her curse louder and almost drop the phone back. With Billy’s little murmurs of dirty encouragement, she rubbed perfect circles. Imagined his fingers and tongue. His sly eyes and those fucking lashes. Muscles bulging hot under her grasp. Evie cried out, succumbed there and hitched to shake and shudder. Billy closed his eyes while she got off. Couldn’t wait to be the one who got her there.

“Fuck, Evie. You’re killing me.” One fists jerked up and down. Unable to get close because he was distracted with her. “I can’t...fucking shit. I was almost there a moment ago when you were here and now, ah...fucking hell.”

“Sounds like you need help.” Evie stretched like a cat against her pillows. Still trembling.

“Or another hand.” He sighed. “Or a mouth. Think about how you’d leave that red lipstick all over my dick.”

“I got an idea. If you give me shit, I’ll end you.” Evie pushed her blissful body up. “Come up to the window.”

“What...” Billy shoved a sheet aside to see her. Out of breath and curls sticking all over. Blushed and fucked. Gorgeous. “What are you doing?” He was still slowly jerking himself to keep the momentum. Evie looked around the grass and shrubbery. Rolled her eyes before lifting up her shirt and moving the bra down.

Billy’s mouth dropped along with his phone so she giggled as he disappeared to grab it.

“Fuck!” Billy caught himself and returned.

“Are they everything you pictured?” She bit her lip and winked. He was dead intent on her tits. Mouth open. Working himself harder.

“Push them against the window.”

Her hard, dark rosy nipples pressed there and Billy moaned. Wished he had them in his hands. Wished he would fuck her mouth and shoot his load on them.

“Yes, Evie, fuck.” He submitted. Almost sounded like a zombie. Under her spell. Typical boy. Working himself until... “Gonna cum.” Strings of release hit the wall as Billy dropped the phone again to finish. Evie still heard his muffled moans on the end and brought herself back down, giggling at the same time Billy fell into his pillows.

“Did I lose you, Billy?”

“No, but if you could pick my balls up off the floor, that’d be great.” He puffed and felt around for a tee to clean up with. “Okay. I’m gonna say this. We’re going to fuck. Hear me? I am going to fuck you. Can’t today. But, it’s happening.”

“So certain. What, are you spent already?”

“Not gonna plan that far, we hang out as you say...and see what happens.” He caught his breath. “Can’t do it here and your two guards are going to be on you this week.”

“You thought awhile about this.” Evie licked her lips, still fixing her bra in place. “Maybe my common sense comes back.”

“Maybe you admit you’re warming up to me again. Sizzling fuse.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Evie rose out of bed and paused to sigh. Tone shifting. “Billy?”

“Hm?”

“What if he comes back?”

“He’s scared. He won’t. I stopped him.”

“I feel like I’m going to be constantly looking over my shoulder. You know?” Evie didn’t want to touch the floor again.

“Then, I guess I know where to stand for your attention.” His quip had Evie biting her lip. Roses bloomed up her thighs and cheeks. “I also left my number under your lamp, by the way. Use it.”

Evie blinked and lifted it to see a torn slip with his handwriting. Slippery bastard.

“Yeah, I got it.” She bit back a smile. “I’ll...ah, see you later, Billy.”

“Yes, you will.” He paused. “One more question. More of a courtesy.”

“What?”

“Preferred method of birth control? Have a couple rubbers. I’m clean, by the way. But, are you an in or out type of girl?”

“Also clean. And I’m an avid user of the pill, smartass. Use that information however you like.” She hung up, leaving Billy to laugh on the other end. He brought the phone away, still so stupid happy. Dreaming himself away.

Psyche went through so many trials for Cupid. Billy wondered about the after. About Eros picking up some trials of his own to keep a girl that tangled him so ardently. About how it felt worth it down to the beating core. All’s fair...

Evangeline Fenny might really be the end of him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for tuning in!! That was actually my first full phone sex scene, it's so fun to write these two and their weird dance. I just love them more by the chp. Chat below or on my tumblr, Alias-B. XOXO

13. Almost Paradise

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all!! Evie attends a party to get back into the swing of being a messy teen and the night doesn't go as expected. Billy opens up about his past in California with a story Evie finds all too familiar. TW: Slight sexual refs, teens drinking/smoking, talk of past s*icide/death, and addiction.

"Are you sure about this?" Heather spoke over Evie's shoulder.

"We always hit the mid-winter break parties. Why wouldn't we, Heath?" Evie applied her favorite shade of cherry in the mirror. Makeup still only covered so much that next night. But, with the swelling down, she hoped it wasn't that bad.

"Figured you'd be hanging with Billy."

"We haven't done anything...much. His dad is grinding him to stay in. He'll...also be at the party I'm sure."

"That why you put on the new bra?"

"It's not new..." Evie fixed her sleeve to hide the black strap. Blushed a whole garden of strawberries. "Like I said...haven't done anything."

"Haven't had the chance, hm." Heather plopped down and stole some mirror space. Relenting as she applied a lustrous pink shade to her lips that matched the scrunchie holding her curls high. "I know you're hopelessly into him. All the eye fucking over the movie last night. If you hadn't have passed out on the couch-"

"Would...you be mad?" Evie looked up.

"I'm just coming around to him again. If you trust him, I will." Heather smiled. "I just have to be the bitchy best friend. Make him sweat it out for my own enjoyment. Cute how he tucked you in last night through, looked like he might not leave you."

Evie lowered a brush doused in gold glitter from her eye.

“I am sorry...about the whole-”

“You don’t have to be sorry about him, Bowers is the one that should be sorry.” Heather frowned. “I’m not mad you didn’t tell me. Honest. I get it. I can’t imagine what I would have done.”

“You wouldn’t be in that situation because you’re smarter than me.”

“No, I’ve made poor boy choices too. We both know that.” Heather beamed. “Can I borrow your earrings? The little cherries you made.”

“Sure, keep them. You get more mileage out of them than I do. I can make more.”

Heather squealed and went to steal them. Evie thought it funny, her friend would rather wear her craft projects than the baby diamonds in silver and gold her parents were always buying.

“Hey, I... My mom’s been lying to me. About my dad.” Evie admitted. “He’s trying to call and give her money, I think. I don’t know if he asks about me. Where he is. I’m just... I don’t know what to do with it all, Heath.” Her voice broke and leveled out. Slowly the brush came up again. “You ever feel like you remember things differently? Like maybe we never see things as they are, we just see things as we are?”

Heather turned to see, still putting the earrings in.

“I’m sure Mona’s trying to protect you. She’s always been so much.” She pressed her lips and tilted Evie’s face to check her work as she always did. “Covered it nicely. How’s your head?”

“No pounding anymore. Not getting dizzy, I think I barely avoided a concussion.” A beat. “I just wonder what exactly she’s protecting me from. It’s eating me.”

Felt like too appropriate an expression.

“We’ll figure it out, but you put way too much pressure on yourself

like you're alone, Eves, and you're not." Heather pulled Evie in to hug her. "You have me and Steve. Friends at school."

Blue hopped up on the desk to meow loudly, both girls broke to giggle.

"Yes, you too, cutie." Heather scratched the kitten's chin. "And Billy, I guess. Whatever."

"Yeah, I don't know what we're doing. But, I don't mind it so I guess I'll chase that." Evie thumbed Heather's lipstick at the corner. "You're set."

"You, too. Let's head out." Heather winked and stood up.

Blue trailed after them so Evie filled her dish. Grabbed a prized jacket she used to be too afraid to wear for how loud it was. Red leather and fringe. *Bitchin'*. A signature piece of clothing. Undoubtedly Evangeline. Fredrick didn't like it so it was packed away with all her sharp edges.

Heather beamed as her friend donned it. Completed Evie's look with a black skirt and graphic shirt tucked in. Vaguely mesh pattern tights and her warm boots. Gold hoops gleaming and her little music note necklace. Plucked piece of juicy fruit and a hard pit for good measure. Curls bounced, almost obscene.

"Think Brock and his shitheads will crash?" Heather waited for the door to be locked before they got into her car.

"I'm not worried about Brock after what happened with Fredrick." Evie stared at the empty place in the Hargrove driveway where Billy's Camaro usually sat. No doubt he was already there raging. Evie got annoyed with the flame in her stomach that flickered at the thought of running into him there with all the dancing they'd been doing. Every little *maybe* and *almost*. Syllables rolling off tongues to tangle.

Loch Nora rangers were undoubtedly the best.

Evie still liked parties. Liked the stimulation. The noise. That beautiful overlapping noise to wash her world out. The drunk idiot teens wandering to dance or do dumb shit. All technicolor. Even liked

them better than what Fredrick would take her too. Annoying how Fredrick had become this constant life point of comparison. Physically out and still here to set the scales.

Time for some liquor.

She peered around and realized Steve never came to them anymore. Heather even asked him and he just declines too politely. Three drinks sank into her stomach so Evie went out back to where some meathead with no shirt was pouring. Moved through sprightly bodies to get another cup. Smoke and sweat in the cool night air.

"Fenny, you hear Tannen got a DUI?" Nameless meathead poured.

"No, shit?" She took her plastic cup back. Black and gold glitter nails clicking the artificial red.

"Swear to god! His dad's basically paying everyone to make it disappear." The guy chuckled. "Lucky, the idiot didn't crash into anyone."

"Yeah, he's a mess." Evie tipped her cup in thanks and watched teens bop around the covered pool to booming music. Rich house on a hill, no one was calling the cops. Cold and slush weren't stopping the festivities, it only made them turn up the noise and heat. Her outfit combated the lingering winter well enough. Perks of being a bigger gal. Thick skin to combat the weather and assholes. "Thanks."

"Plenty more to go around."

Evie caught a bunch of metalheads thrashing around a huge trampoline. Jumping from the lowest part of the roof to it and climbing all over. Billy among them spitting beer and cackling. A hungry wolf against the bright moon. Readied to toss his head back and-

"Evangeline!" He howled and she rolled her eyes below, drinking. Cup lifted to acknowledge them. Billy flashed his teeth, glowed there at her. Still among his following.

"You clean up well, Fenny!" One boy cooed so Billy shoved him into one of the many seat cushions that had been stolen to line the perch.

"Why not join us? Stay awhile." Billy crouched at the edge. Admired Evie glittering and that outfit. Tassels constantly in motion, she looked like a song leaping off unworthy pages. They echoed the calls and she laughed outright, went back inside to a chorus of whines wanting her to stay and indulge them in their debauchery.

"They out of the hard stuff already?" Heather approached and offered a tiny joint to Evie that she caved and puffed. "Tammy's asking. I'm switching to water."

"Beer only it looks like. It's raining boys out there though."

"Oh, maybe I'll catch myself one." Heather winked and wandered outside with the smoke.

Evie got squished in between her and Tammy moments later. Talking school and beauty and graduation getting closer. Across the way, Billy had a whole room entertained with his California stories. Evie lingered to see his eyes flicker over to her.

The strange radar he had when she was around. Always on high. He smiled bright and animated his tale, kept them all hooked and laughing because he was just too badass. Too good. A firework in this boring town. Perched on the table with a smoke in hand.

Spinning tales around the way he spun her under confetti.

And they kept peering at each other. Billy got more persistent as Evie made it a point not to look. To stay reeled into Tammy gushing about the car she was almost saved up for. This baby pink bug she dreamed about. Robin joined them and Tammy blushed as they shared a freshly rolled joint. Heather and Evie shared knowing looks.

Billy decided he wanted attention from Evangeline and left the stories behind to cross toward her. Evie felt sparks when he plucked up her hand, nodding aside. One tug and smoldering eyes. She didn't move and played a pout.

"I'm having an important discussion with the girls about the principal's clearly fake mustache, Hargrove." She lifted her eyes, biting her lip as if that might curve her intoxication. Curled a smirk

he matched.

"Thrilling. Something tells me it ain't getting mileage." Billy didn't take his eyes from Evie. "Ladies?"

"We just finished actually, Evie was about to get herself *another* drink. You look like just the soul brave enough to help with that." Tammy, oblivious but a wingman to the end, cut in so Billy pulled Evie up.

Heather flashed a guilty smile as they went off because Evie was aimlessly bickering. They didn't go out back for a drink. Billy climbed the steps with her hand. Slowly Evie adjusted to lace their fingers. They moved over bodies and went down the hallways into a vacant TV room with beaten couches and thick screens.

"What are you doing?" Evie dropped her arms as Billy bit his tongue with intent eyes and crossed into her space for a kiss. Tasting of some green apple schnapps the boys outside had downed with all the hard stuff.

"Just something I thought about for a while." He cupped her face for another and Evie felt dizzy for the first time after her drinks. Billy and his lips. Tasting her. Pulling her back into a couch with him.

"You mean like a day?" Evie had giggled. Breaking the kiss to see his pupils spread.

"Hey, it was a long, *long* day." Came a shrug, eyes on her pretty tights that were *sending* him. "I can only say so much over the phone." Hands worked under the skirt. Melted Evie down while she came in for more of him.

Straddling Billy's hard thigh, she combed his hair back and ravished him in turn. What could she say? She liked to kiss him. Liked his mouth and his palms and his heat against her. Scorching. Billy adjusted, taking her hips to press his leg up into her.

Evie rocked unconsciously. Gave him a little moan. Let him untuck her shirt. She came out and felt his hand on her bra. Fingers sunk under the fabric while they locked eyes. Rolled her nipple until

another moan lulled. Evie still pulling at his hair, lips opening.

“No bad kisses yet, hm?” The hum hitched as Evie pressed into him. Kissed him deeper. Not worried she might squish him with the shameless, signature way he touched her.

“Let’s try a few more.” Evie about whimpered into his tongue. Brow furrowing. Breath quicker. Something ready to churn in her belly.

Billy gripped her hips to encourage her on. Shifted down the line of her jaw. Silken mouth trailing to release warm sighs. Evie had her hands pressed against his grey tee. Skimming under the leather jacket to feel the hard lines. Miles of him to trace and explore. Shifting, one hand came to his left shoulder. Finger pressed and Billy gave a jerk, breath catching as he pulled back to hiss.

Evie narrowed and yanked away the moment he looked in pain. Avoiding her eyes as if he wasn’t just trying to turn them over and finish this.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Billy leaned back in for a kiss she barely responded to. Thoughts racing. “It’s nothing.” He cupped the back of her head. Lips all over Evie’s neck. Fingers slipped to push his jacket aside and Billy grasped her wrist. “Evie, it’s nothing.”

“You’re hurt.” She frowned. Billy gripped her arm still, searching. He opened his mouth to speak and the door burst open, giggles sounding at the same time Evie threw herself out of Billy’s lap. Practically to the other side of the couch. Shamefully tucking her shirt back in.

“Oooh, this one’s taken,” Tommy backed up and processed who was in there again with Carol under his arm, “Billy and Fenny? No fucking way, you two. Ha!” He cackled and Billy gave an agitated breath.

“We’re busy, shut the door, man.”

“No shit, you’re busy. I’m shocked. I thought Fen wasn’t speaking to you ever again after-”

"Hagen, we're talking." Evie slid her eyes to Carol who'd gotten dead silent. Eyes bright and full of hate. Piles and piles. A tremendous build of fire and loathing directed at Evie for existing in the same space.

"Talk away. Have fun, kids!" Tommy only found it funny. Jeering in his annoying way before Carol shoved off him and stomped out. "Hey Carol, what's your problem?" He smacked the door shut following his upset girlfriend down the hall.

"Shit, asshole." Billy rubbed his shoulder. "Where were we?" The purr made Evie turn her head, thoughts elsewhere. Billy crawled to kiss her again and Evie stood. "Hey, where're you going?"

"I just, I feel weird now." Evie stumbled around the coffee table. Cheeks bright and rosy. Not sparing him a glance because Carol's eyes gnawed her. Created an incessant buzzing around her brain. Billy jolted to follow but she was out the door. Looking around for Carol and Tommy's loudmouth. Boots hurried down the steps after Tommy, still trying to coax his girl back to the festivities.

"Carol, hey," Evie pushed beyond Tommy once Carol was out a sliding door, "Hey, can we just talk?"

"You are such a fucking loser, you know that?" Carol spun on her heel to direct some teenage rage in Evie's direction. A few outside by the kegs noticed the tiff, pausing to see.

A crack.

"Why do you hate me so much?" Evie dropped her shoulders. Billy slipped out and stepped up behind Tommy, pausing at the standoff. Carol staggered. Clearly intoxicated. Cracking a huge, watery smile. Reckless. She stepped toward Evie so a burst came. "Why! I'm not mean to you! I've never been mean to you! I only talk back and I still feel guilty, but you're so... Why?"

"You're nice to me?" She made it sound unreal and laughable.

"Yeah, actually! I don't understand it, I've tried to be kind to you." Evie felt a tear slip down and stayed level. "No one deserves to be

treated the way I see you treat others. So, why?"

"Because!" Carol shot back, welling too. "You're so *fucking* kind and...playing innocent...and you're good! And *I*..." She stopped with another deafening crack. So loud, it rang. Carol really stopped to reflect and hated what she saw looking back at her. But, Evie was here looking too so the hate rerouted.

"Good?" Evie breathed and so much ugly spread in her veins like a disease.

"And...And you get all this attention! Acting like you don't know! And just look at you! Do you really think you'd get that attention if these boys didn't feel sorry for you?" Carol stumbled and pointed a finger in Evie's face, furious and shaking. Too close.

Evie got silent. Dropped everything she felt.

"You're the one I feel sorry for."

Carol buzzed with rage and reeled back to slap her so hard, the force sent her into Tommy.

"Girl fight!" Came some yelps.

"What the hell, Carol?" He caught Evie on pure instinct, not understanding either. Billy charged forward and Carol kept pushing as Evie found her footing.

A chorus of shocked gasps and awe came from the drunk teens near the pool. The music blared.

"Hit me back, you bitch! Yeah? Do it like you did to Tannen. Think you're any better than me!" Carol was near sobbing. Eyes crinkling with tears as she shoved before Tommy got in front of her. Looped an arm around her waist.

"That's enough, Care, c'mon." He and Billy separated the girls, but Evie wasn't trying to hit back. Just stared with huge eyes and a palm against her hot cheek.

"Hey. Hey, you okay?" Billy stood in front of her now, tugging. Evie

wasn't budging. Enthralled. Stuck. Sinking. Not good. "Let's go. She's wasted."

"Evie!" Heather was racing across the grass to help. "Carol, back off her." She planted her feet between them and Carol sneered, struggling against her boyfriend.

"Ooh, Princess Heather to the rescue. Admit it, you just like being the pretty friend." More hissing channeled out.

"Just, shut up!"

"How about you tell Fenny why Tannen even tried to chase her skirts that night? Yeah?" Carol broke free and tackled Heather into the grass. "Tell her what a shit friend you are, baby!"

"Another girl fight!" Teens howled across the way. Billy and Tommy shoved in to pull the clawing women apart as they rolled around and pulled at hair.

Evie heard herself shouting to stop, barely audible over the crowds that closed in on them to cheer and chant.

"Tell her, sweet pea? Tell her that her dear B-F-F set her up with some animal. I was at that party, I heard you, bitch!" Carol skidded as Tommy pulled her off. Billy had Heather by the arm, trying to yank her up from the grass. She began to sniffle. "Perfect Heather. Little priss who can do no wrong. Perfect body. Perfect life. The teen dream. Tossing bones to us lowly folk when you're done."

Carol laughed and cried all at once. Even the crowd slowed to watch her. Evie felt a coldness spread at the display.

"Oh yeah, Heather, you're a real carpenter's dream!" Carol mocked relentlessly. "Flat as a board and needs a *screw*! Go on and tell Fenny what a great friend you are. You brushed Tannen aside and pawed that puppy off on someone easier."

"I didn't know he was like that yet, okay! It was stupid." Heather admitted, tears falling. Evie froze at that, didn't move toward her.

"Heath, what's she talking about?" Evie hated how wounded she

sounded.

"I just thought maybe he'd cheer you up, we all were drinking and, Tannen, he...he was nice at the time. So I thought. I just...you know-"

"Just, what?" Evie leveled out. Billy let Heather go once he brought her up from the grass so she came to Evie. Crowds all but hushed.

"Can...Can we not talk about it here?" Heather tucked her hair aside, sounding too small.

"No, I love an audience! Talk." Evie's spine went rigid.

"I just...nudged Tannen your way. You just broke up with that guy over the summer and your dad left. Tannen was, I don't know, it was stupid. He was nice and...and good looking. I thought he'd make you feel better. I didn't know he was like that yet. I just was trying to hook my friend up."

"Please, you alluded to owing him a favor after. He ate that up. You talked up a desperate animal in need of a hot beef injection. You said Fenny could barely thread a needle these days." Carol bellowed. More shock. More awe.

"I was super drunk!" Heather covered her eyes to rub them

"So, you told him to try fucking me! Told him I was desperate for it!" Evie's voice rose and Heather quelled with shame.

"You were so sad...I thought he'd give you a good night." The tone trailed off.

"I'm fat, but I can get laid on my own, thanks. I don't need your fucking help, how little do you think of me?" Evie's curls shook around with the same fervor. Heather just held herself and stared at the grass. "Do I really seem that pathetic to you?"

"No, it's not that at all-"

"It feels like that," Evie stepped back, "keep me around because I make you look like the Queen Bee and toss some asshole with a reputation my way out of pity if I cease to function."

"Evie, it's not like that!" Heather wept and got her hand shoved off when she tried to touch her friend. Evie wiggled through the crowd because it split for her fury.

"Get off me," she went around the house, "get away from me, Heather! I don't need you!"

Heather stopped on the lawn and just stood there to see Evie follow the street lamps off.

Carol watched them go, sagging into Tommy who was definitely too drunk for this.

"Jesus, what'd you do?" He pulled her in another direction. Back to the house. Away from the excitement resuming. "Shouldn't start that shit." They got back inside so he led his girlfriend into an empty bathroom. "You okay?"

"I am now. Bitches. I just...I can't fucking..." Carol sniffled and cleared her throat. "I don't know why I hate her, *okay*, I just do! She just gets...everything."

"This is about your mom getting back with that asshole."

"It's not about that!" Her defense went up. "I'm just tired of Fenny acting like she can get everything she wants. Throwing herself at Billy, fuck. Wondered why he all but dropped everyone else. I thought he and Vicki had something. Gotta be kidding me." Carol crossed her arms to lean back into the counter as Tommy washed his face with cold water, nauseous.

"I don't even think Fenny's gonna go for him when she's already got a thing with..." He perked. Lips sealing. Carol noticed.

"Thing with who?"

"Nothing, I just...I saw something...and I'm drunk. I'm fucking drunk, Care." He got his shirt tugged.

"Tommy." She sucked her cheeks in and he knew he'd be caving. "What did you see?"

“Evie’s been seeing Bowers, I saw her leaving his place all roughed up. Not the first time, I live a street away. Saw them in his driveway shouting at each other once. It was so dark. They kissed and she...well, her head dropped down for a bit. Thought I was having a nightmare there. I tried to forget it and just act like... I didn't believe it was her until I saw her on that bus. I'm drunk, fuck...” Tommy blurted in one breath. Carol’s lips opened.

“No fucking way.”

“Listen, I could be wrong-”

“We can’t let them get away with that. I mean, he’s a teacher. What if he really hurt-”

“You’re not doing it to save, Fenny, you’re doing it to make her life worse. Just...forget I said anything. I’m fucked up. Shit. I fucked up. I fucked up so bad.” Tommy rubbed his eyes. Let them dart. Carol slid her gaze away and crossed her fingers behind her back.

“Fine. Whatever you say, T. We’ll forget it.” Another pull brought him in for a kiss. Tommy caressed her arms and felt Carol trying to make herself small. “Can I stay at your place tonight? I can’t go home to Jason on our couch again. I just...I can’t. I can't do it, Tommy.”

She trembled so he tucked her under his chin.

“You know you don’t have to ask, babe.”

*** ** **

Evie was down the hill still stomping under barely lit streets. Teens ranging to music still in the distance. Forgetting her. Intent, she marched over frozen sidewalks covered in slush. The tip of her nose and ears grew chilled pink. Heather had shouted after but stopped the pursuit at the end of the lawn. Ruefully, Evie wouldn’t weep, she already cried enough this damn week.

She just wanted to be better. Higher. Then all of it.

The unmistakable rev of Billy’s Camaro rolled up behind her.

“Evie, don’t make me come out to steal you. Just get in.” The window came down. “You can’t walk home in that skirt with the snow. We don’t have to talk about it.”

She paused to hear him. Eyes on the wind sweeping frosted shrubbery about across the perfectly trimmed lawns. Rich people. Cozy in their homes burning bags of money on nights like this.

“Are you going to be all the same to me, Billy? Tell me right now, I swear to god. Pretty face trying to get its way with words that are just...empty. You gonna get mad if I don’t put out and try to grab at me like Tannen? Why are you bothering with me?” Evie sniffled, hands out and dropping as he watched her. Brow furrowed. “You saw them looking at us funny.”

“Evie.” He reasoned. “Where am I right now? Am I back there shotgunning free liquor or am I freezing my balls off coming after you? Again.”

“You’re here with me. But, how do I know this isn’t some weird game for you with a prize at the end. Kids like us, we don’t go together. Are you trying to win a prize so you can move to the next? Can’t blame me for thinking it.” She approached the car. Still guarding herself. “I can’t let that go.”

“I like you, Evie, and I can tell you that a hundred times. But, it means nothing if you won’t let me.” Billy leaned over to click the door open. “You don’t let anyone like you.” He waited as she didn’t move, hands gripping the wheel before he sighed. “Didn’t notice the other kids, if you really care. I’m the Keg King.”

A cold breath puffed out her nose, almost amused.

“I was enjoying the view.” Billy drew those glittery blues to her expression.

“What makes this a view?”

“You.” A shrug pulled along with her heartstrings. “Get in, let’s go somewhere.”

“Where?”

"Anywhere you like. Just as we planned, remember?" Billy winked at her and Evie's walls lowered. She looked back at the house party echoing and got in to buckle herself.

"How much have you had to drink?"

"Relax." He sped off. "Barely anything and I even drank water. You proud?" He fiddled with the radio. "Wasn't feeling it tonight."

"Looked like a party on the roof."

"Well, I still gotta impress the following." Billy gestured to the glovebox. "Put a tape in, will you?"

"You and your hair metal...and...oh?" Evie skimmed the selection while they whirled away from Loch Nora. "What is this? Fleetwood Mac. I'm so impressed."

"Ugh, that must be Max's, she keeps leaving her tapes in my car. Throw it out."

"Wow. Apologize to Stevie." Evie gasped and mocked. Cupped her hands over the sacred tape. "He didn't mean that." Billy peered over to crack a laugh at her jabbing. "Alright, alright. Can't go wrong with a little Queen."

"Fair enough." Billy let her slip the tape in and mess with the volume so they could still hear each other. "You really mad at Heather?"

Evie went flat.

"Yes and I'll stay mad at least until school starts back up." She crossed her arms, relaxing as the heat picked up. Too good just as Carol said.

"Where am I taking you?" Billy turned down another road, flying beyond the trees and Evie stared at his profile. Intent on the road for once.

"You opposed to a little more cold?"

"I have blankets in back. Might have to get cozy." He slid those eyes over and Evie sucked her cheeks in.

"Take a left up here. I know a secret spot."

** ** *

"You didn't say anything about hiking through a dark forest," Billy whined with his arms full of blankets. "If Michael Myers reams my ass-"

"Maybe I'm a Thing like the movie and I'm taking you somewhere to *assimilate*." Evie teased ahead of him.

"I actually like the sound of that, Angel. Proceed. Assimilate with me all night long." Suggestive.

She just laughed, loathing him.

"It's not far. I'll protect you, Billy. You hear the water and ice cracking? Chicken." Evie flicked a flashlight they snagged from his car after parking in the thrush. "Just up there. C'mon. I promise it's worth it." She hurried up, leaving him behind to watch her silhouette in starlight

"Someday, I'm gonna stop chasing this girl," Billy uttered under his breath, hurrying to follow because that was the biggest lie he'd ever told himself. "The whole 'no murder' deal stands."

"Naturally." Evie giggled and stepped over a log. "Here."

They walked along the train tracks going both directions. Came upon the cliffs where the bridge was laid out. Billy looked out at the frozen water yards below. At the moon and stars bathing the space in an ethereal glow. Frozen water framing the rocks. Looked like a castle full of magic.

"Down here." She went to the edge and climbed down under the steel and wood tracks. Into the space that was suspended over the great fall.

"This is your spot?"

"You'll see why." Evie reached for his wrist so he didn't trip. Snagged the blankets from him. "Prettier with all the icicles. Look." Billy did. Admired the iridescent, dewy glimmer. "And now we wait."

"Wait?" He came to Evie, lighting a cigarette. "For what?"

"You'll see, I said." She settled a blanket around her shoulders and gave him one. Playfully covering his shoulders.

"Wait to freeze to death." Billy had grumbled as Evie paced farther, stepping over boards and balancing on steel beams.

He saw the moonlight stream through the tracks into her curls. Admired her when she peered back to press a genuine smile. His cigarette dropped. Cherry glowing all the way down. Air whistled.

"Tell me more about yourself, Billy Hargrove." Evie cocked her head at a dewy spiderweb. "Favorite fruit? Favorite insect? Are you fonder of chocolates or-?"

"You think I'm interesting." He decided.

"I think you're here with me." Evie curled around a steel post to see him.

"Tangerines," Billy replied after a beat, "and favorite bug? Do scarab beetles count? Just think they look cool as shit."

"Naturally. Good choice, I suppose." She sized him up and tapped her chin when Billy gestured across the way. Neither moving. "Pineapple and luna moths."

"Luna moths?"

"Yeah," Evie hummed to herself and hid away behind the beam, "I always thought they looked like they were fluttering straight out of our dreams. Don't you?"

Billy took one step. Really watched her shift in ethereal lights. Luminous and bathed utterly.

"Evangeline." He mused as she teetered across a board and came to

the edge. Eyes on the water far below. "Why a singer?"

"Hm?" She faced away from him. Seemingly in a dream herself. Billy imagined moths glowing around her pretty hair. Fluttering to follow her into the dark. He wished she'd extend a hand to him so he could join. Follow her right into it.

"Why do you want to be a singer?"

"Always liked it. Growing up, I just felt right, I guess. The most like me. This girl I wanted to be and she's on a stage under too many lights. Singing her heart out to miles of crowds. Touching them all in a way. Connecting." Evie trailed her fingers over chains that hung down, clicked them together like wind chimes. Billy edged up after her. Not getting too close. Wondered about what was ticking in Evie's soul.

"Nice to be heard when you put music out into the world," Billy observed and she seemed to like that. Curls bouncing softer with her voice. Evie unfurled for him there and she was breathtaking.

"I wanna write music that lifts people so high, they'll have to look down to see heaven." Evie gasped gently, heart-soaring while she came to the other edge on the opposite side. Almost leaning too far.

"Yeah?" He felt her tug tender cords in his soul. Didn't take his eyes away.

"I want to write something that makes others understand they're not alone. Not small. You know? One great song before I..." Evie trailed off with a sober sort of melodic call beckoning and looked far below to the great fall that was one stumble away. One step. Fingers opened. Her arms lifted enough to drop the blanket behind her and feel the wind. "You think I can write a song powerful enough to help me fly over this bridge, Billy?"

One hand lifted higher, lips open and unable to stop. Unable to look away from the edge. Steady as can be, Billy slid his palm against her. Skin awakening. Reminded her that she was here. That he was with her. That they weren't alone and the song was alive. Fingers laced and Evie seemed to reel back to him, brown eyes glinting to see

his face there. Freckles all glowy. Curls spun of gold shifting just right.

"You're beautiful." She observed there.

Billy surely would have followed her to the edge, but he didn't want her to go. Stay.

"You're strange." He'd found this sentiment before and it sounded all the more lovely tonight. Billy gently pulled her from the edge. "Come here, Angel, warm me up."

Billy draped himself in the other blanket again. Shifted her under it as if it were a cape. A shroud that would keep them both from harm's way. From the edge.

"Okay, Dracula, easy." She stumbled into him. The diamond lines of Billy's chest cut into her. "Wait, you feel that?" She watched his earring shift while he looked around. "The vibration."

"Yeah, I do." He muttered suggestively.

"Not that kind. Just listen. Feel it." Evie stepped out, almost giddy as she plucked her blanket up and felt around. Billy welcomed it in his chest. The smooth vibrations generating from above. "Get ready."

"Ready?" He laughed, coming toward her again. Billy stepped into her space as Evie reached back to curl her fingers into his leather jacket. Head tilted up toward the tracks.

"Lie down with me." She began to tug and Billy felt this drunkenness take him over at Evie and her smile brightening. They reclined together wrapped in blankets and Billy realized it as the horns called over Evie's wild laughter.

"You're full of surprises, Fenny."

"It helps to scream it out, whatever you want. Just let it go with the train." She kept snickering as the bridge really began to shake. Billy watched her face. Alight and wild. Red lips against the moonlight pooling to spill over her and illuminate the glitter in her makeup.

“You’re beautiful.” He said then. Unsure if she really heard him over the howl of the oncoming cars.

Billy laughed with her. The roar of a train began to charge above. Blaring horns and steel wheels cranking fast. Her nose crinkled as the windswept their hair. Lips opening to scream with it. Billy couldn’t help joining her. Both of them calling out against the rumbling that never seemed to end.

Icicles fell around the edges and reminded Billy of confetti. Falling so slow and sweet to decorate the space. Shattering colors. That night he first danced with her and kissed her long and hard. Spinning round and round.

Evie pulled herself up and climbed higher into the beams. Head tossed back to give a call like a siren.

“Fuck you!” She saw Billy stand and peered at him. “Keep yelling! Anything you want at anyone! Really let ‘em have it!”

“You first!”

“You left mom and me, you selfish fucking prick!” She raged up into the air for her father that wasn’t around. Hair whirling up into the gust of wind. The train took her syllables with it. Shouting back. “You can’t just make people and then abandon them! They’ll think they did something wrong forever!” Billy felt his chest tighten. Joined her. Heart bursting.

“Why didn’t you just let me fucking save you! Why wasn’t I enough!” He didn’t yell for Neil who beat him senseless. Perched upon steel Evie saw Billy tense. Burst again. “I hate you!” He cried that. Evie’s fingers pressed harder into steel. Lost in him. Billy heaved for fresher air. Having never faced it all.

The train ended as they stared at each other. Both breathing into the frozen air. Heaving to gasp.

Evie slipped down and tossed her arms around Billy’s shoulders. Kissed him back into cold steel as if she was trying to comfort him. Kiss him all better. Luna moths landing delicately on their bodies to

open and close their lovely wings.

"Why'd you do that?" Billy asked of her for the first time. Evie beamed at the turn in the phrase.

"Because at that time, you weren't going to." She brought him back in. Wanting more. Cupping his face. "Feel any better?" Evie drew out, leaving him to look fluttered. Unsure, Billy swept in so he didn't have to reply yet. Miles of kisses hot like the cherry of his smoke he let tumble below.

"Felt good." He murmured, pulling her into him. "If anything."

"You can't tell anyone about this place. It's my secret. Our secret." She pecked his lips and Billy drew out because they both were too cold to continue. The heat in her belly wasn't enough.

He tilted his forehead against hers, lulled forth when her weight shifted back and the loss. The loss of her ached Billy down to his marrow. This almost paradise they constructed together.

Curls fell into his face before he lifted to glimpse Evie once more. Wondered how she'd look swaying with lush moonbeams in her hair always. Pretty goddess draped in starlight. Painted in pearly shimmers.

Enough to take his breath, Billy gasped for it back and gave this distant chuckle. Nodded to promise he wouldn't tell a soul. Evie caught him wincing as her hand moved over his shoulder again so she left him completely.

"Sorry."

"It's nothing." He turned to go, eyes elsewhere. Anywhere else they could dart. Not on her. "Let's just head back." Billy felt like he was in a dream. Spinning and dizzy all the way back to the car. He realized as the locks clicked that Evie had been speaking.

"Are you alright?" She swallowed and Billy looked at the car keys in his hand. Little scorpion keychain glinting. "Were you talking to your mom back there?"

“Yeah. I just...” Billy shook his head and turned the engine on. “I don’t know where it came from.”

“I thought it’d be Neil.”

“I guess I can’t even stomach dreaming of him.” He replied. “I know it’s not a dream if he’s there. Even if he’s getting *his*. You know?”

“Yeah. I, uh... Do you...?” Evie squirmed in her seat, worried he’d close up on her as he stared at the road and drove at a steady speed for once.

“Do I, what?”

“Hate her?”

“No.” He skidded at a red light, almost sounded defensive. Shoulders fell. Knuckles went white on the wheel. “Sometimes.” Evie felt her cheeks burn and tried to sound even, it still came out as an airy whisper.

“What happened to her, Billy?”

“She just died.” He sighed to calm his own tone from sounding hot. “She died when I was fourteen.” Finally, he corrected himself. “She killed herself.”

“I’m sorry.” Evie tried not to stare at him. Fear it made him uncomfortable quelled, but she couldn’t look away. Billy closed his eyes at the next red light to breathe, opened them.

“It happens.” He said. “People wake up one morning and decide they don’t want to wake up ever again...and they act on it. And they succeed.” It felt like he started to drive slower the closer they got to Cherry. “Doesn’t matter who they leave behind.”

Evie carefully extended her hand over to touch his in his lap. Because it does fucking matter and it always will. The fingers on the wheel flexed and Billy didn’t tear away.

“She had a lot of problems. Like my dad. Maybe they tried to fix

each other once. I don't know." Billy continued. Too tender about it all. "They divorced when I was nine. All the back in forth. The visitations. Courtrooms making me choose and I just...I wanted her. I wanted it to stop too. I know she was messed up, but she tried to get better... You believe me, don't you?"

His blue eyes glistened. Jaw tensing. Billy pulled up between their houses and neither moved as he cut the engine.

"Yes, I believe you." Evie found the syllables around her tongue.

"You believe people can get better, Evie?"

She almost welled with him. It struck her heart with lightning.

"I really hope so." She had to or she was lost just as well. Evie sniffled and tried to be stone again when all the emotion came into her voice to cloud it.

"She never hit me though. Dad drank and beat the shit out of her. Made her drug habits worse and worse. Liked when she was some coked-out zombie. Pills and needles, it just... Fuck, Evie, she just kept falling back. They fought for custody the whole time and I really thought she was getting better. Dad acted like a fucking hero, rescuing me from an evil druggie."

"You're worth getting better for." Evie felt Billy slip from her hand so he could clear his throat and rub his eyes.

"I found her, you know?" He shuddered and stared at his open palms in his lap. Saw red on them. "It was her weekend and I took the bus home from school like I always did. We were going to go to the boardwalk."

His head tipped back and he gave this grim smile. They never made it to that boardwalk, Evie realized.

"The smell of that house, I'll never... Just rotten...and I couldn't even see her face at first because of all the flies." It was Billy who reached out aimlessly for Evie's wrist. Something to stay rooted, she figured. "My mom was beautiful and she always smelled like oranges. Like the big orchard she worked at. But, the fucking house just

smelled like shit and piss and vomit and rust when I came in. Like death. I found her in the bathtub all bloated and ugly and the water was already brown. She sat in there alone decaying and no one..."

Billy kept rubbing his eyes again until they were too swollen to cry. Evie had his hand in both of hers, clamped tight to keep him alert. Unwavering.

"I didn't know what to do so I called for help. I couldn't lift her out, I wasn't strong enough and I kept screaming... Then, I tried my dad three times, and...fuck, I ended up calling Susan. They'd started dating a couple of months before and I didn't like her. Or her kid. But, she was too nice and gave me a number to call if I needed her after they'd gotten serious. I don't know why I kept it in my backpack. She came when they were loading my mom up. Kept trying to hold me and I wouldn't let her until I was too weak to fight it."

"She does care about you. She's scared, too."

"My dad cleans up his act well from time to time. Plays the perfect father and boyfriend, she fell for it. In too deep now with no way out. He'll bleed her dry, too. My dad, he likes it when people don't have a way out. Mom found a way though, spite him." Billy dropped his head back again, chest sinking before he looked at Evie. Quivered there. "I just get...so mad."

"I know." She sank into the seat a little to watch him.

"She left a note that said sorry. That she loved me. Left this for me, too." Billy fingered his pendant. "Wasn't enough. Sometimes, I walk into my own house now and that smell... I can't escape it. I'm always in that house. In that room with the flies covering everything."

That shook Evie. They weren't perfect kids, but they didn't deserve to be trapped in that house. In that room. Where trauma was fed on a loop. A haunted house where they were the ghosts doomed and trapped to wander. To relive what killed them from the first.

"I tried so fucking hard to make her better, I took care of her and I wasn't there. I let my dad drive her to-"

"Billy, it's not your fault." Evie had his hand pressed against her chest at that. "It's not." Both painfully sober, they just looked at each other. Leveled out. "I'm sure she tried so hard for you. Some people, they just... Addiction is..."

Evie felt this ice swell up her stomach. Addiction is a harsh cycle. It never really ends, you work at it and fight it, but it's always there in the back of your memories urging. Once you start, you're always an addict. Recovering or not. You can't stop.

You can't stop.

"Getting help is so hard when you're sick." Was all Evie could manage. Unable to portray how profoundly she understood. "Your job was to be a kid."

"All I wanted was to go back to California and now, I'm not sure if I ever can. Just knowing she won't be there again. Sometimes when I'm here, I just pretend she's alive and still picking oranges on long, hot days." Billy swallowed. "My dad just...shut down for the first time when he showed up to get me from Susan's. I asked him if he was gonna hug me. Susan had for a long time. And he just tensed and told me not to be soft. That I can't act like a pussy and mom was just too fucking sick to get better. But, I knew she had a chance. I knew it was enough. I..." Billy's voice cut over. He tried to gasp for some clear air so Evie pulled him over the seats into her arms.

"You're enough." She said. Plain and simple. So easily.

Billy vibrated in response.

"Sometimes I think you navigate the world like something bad is coming for you and you're waiting for it, Evie," he muffled into her, "and I don't want you to go, too."

"I won't go." Evie held steady, eyes flickering beyond him at dead space. "Promise."

Hands came up like he might shove her off before Billy shattered. Melted into her heat. The soft slopes of flesh. Arms went under his so she could hold him close. Billy hitched a sob and stopped anything

else that dared creep up his throat. Fingers wrung into her clothing. Evie let him squeeze her tight. Within inches of breath. Make her a balmy slice of paradise he could sink into.

Billy closed his eyes. Face pressing into the line of her collar. Inhaling perfume and lotion. Flames bubbling up from her skin.

“Come to bed with me,” Evie’s lips touched his ear, “nothing funny. I just don’t want you to sleep alone tonight.” Billy felt himself relent, only nodded into her hair.

They snuck out under street lamps and went into the Fenny house. Cleaned up without words to dress down for bed. Blue wiggled in with them atop the pillows and Billy faced away.

Evie wished she had something better to say, but she just told him goodnight. Gently murmured it against his spine as she tucked in behind him.

“Evie.” Billy shifted after a long beat. Turned over to face her there. Barely awake at that point, her eyes cracked.

“Hm?”

“Thanks.” Billy moved again on his back because it always seemed to get her nuzzling into his side. “What I told you. Don’t tell anyone else. Please.” Arm stretching so Evie could take her place and mumble something he didn’t catch, a nod followed. Nose pressing to the cotton tee he left on, Evie slipped away first. Left Billy to his thoughts as he watched the dim lights pull between the blinds and curtains to make patterns along her ceiling.

He knew he was consumed and he wasn’t sorry. Not one bit. Evie tumbled deeper into her dreams. Not stirring as fingers played with her curls. Petting them softly. Billy mulled over it all and he just wasn’t ashamed and he couldn’t figure out how to make her see it. But, he was willing to keep trying. Evie was worth trying for, too. Plain and simple. Sighing out, Billy let himself begin to slip too.

“Anyone...” He couldn’t help uttering, almost melodic. Lashes fluttering. “...*who knows what love is...*”

Billy peered down at Evie's face, peaceful and relaxed against his chest. Cheek pressing hot through the fabric as his fingertips ran a barely-there line down the silky skin.

The rest of the lyrics never came. Tangled into his heartstrings where they made a cozy home.

Billy immersed himself in burning amber, closed his eyes to follow Evie into absolute darkness. Almost paradise.

Notes for the Chapter:

The continued love on this fic means the world to me. Seriously, thank you all. As always, feel free to leave words below about the chapter and the journey so far!! xoxo

14. Such Sweet Sorrow

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for waiting!! Billy & Evie have a quiet morning after the party. Start to face the reality of what they have. Friends reconnect. Enjoy the chapter!! TW: Brock's aggressive drunk behavior. Flashes of past trauma and Pica mentions. Some heavy petting.

Evie finally had him.

For the first time, she was the one gone from the bed as Billy opened his eyes.

One hand felt for her and touched the wall. Dead air where the warmth used to be. Frowned because he wasn't able to bury his nose in endless brown curls to inhale sweet amber.

Billy surged up and heard the shower running. Evie singing unabashedly over it like no one was in the house. Something he couldn't place on the rock and blues end. Bigger than he was used to hearing from her. Sultry even. Lungs vibrating to handle the smooth sound that was ever-growing.

"Ah oh, smokestack lightnin..." She echoed out against the rush of water. *"Oh..."*

Billy pictured her hips swaying about as she washed her hair. Suds and curls slick over her shoulders. Smoke fogging. Huge notes he didn't know she could handle.

"Whoa-oh, tell me, baby..."

Fuck, he was hard.

"Where did ya stay last night?"

A heave followed before he got out of bed. Aching.

"Why don't ya hear me cryin'?"

Trying not to picture her body slick against his under the pounding of hot water. Droplets falling over her lips and eyelashes. The notes she reverberated that sounded like moans. Fingers digging into warm flesh.

Billy had to stop it for his own sanity. Three pounds on the door had her skidding against a bath mat.

Record scratch.

"What!" Evie blushed deep maroon because the show was not for him.

"Play me some Def Leppard, Angel!" Billy echoed back. "Also, I gotta take a leak." It was satisfying to hear the loud huff follow.

"My mom's bathroom is free in her bedroom."

"Yeah, I try to avoid parent's personal rooms when I'm at a girl's house. If you can believe it."

"I don't. But, I won't dare ask why. I'm just finishing up...and I'm not your personal jukebox!" Evie tilted her head back under the spray.

"We'll see about that, let me in there to press some buttons. I'm a pro." Billy got lower and playfully jiggled the handle as the water shut off. Both of them acting their usual combative selves with each other.

"Keep dreaming, William." Sarcasm made him feel right at home.

"Believe me, I will, Evangeline." Billy stepped out when the door opened. Steam followed Evie scrunching her curls into a towel. Covered in a deep purple bathrobe that drowned her dewy body. Clean and still blushing, tying it tighter at the sight of him there looking positively messy and stunning.

Ocean eyes sparked without shame.

“Look at you all glowing and wet. Are you...double knotting that because I’m here?” He teased, getting close so one finger could creep under the tie. A tug had Evie’s body flush into his. Heat radiating. Damp ringlets dripping down.

“Yes.” The reply was instant. “I’m Billy-proofed now.”

“You couldn’t Billy-proof yourself if you tried.” Towering, her slunk in toward Evie’s unamused expression. Earned himself a wet hair towel tossed over his head. Cackles erupted.

“All yours.” Evie hurried around him and shut her bedroom door to get changed. Threw a plain skirt on to tuck a shirt into it. No plans to leave the house or see Heather.

Heather.

Evie eyed her bookcase of treats. Plucked up a gemstone and didn’t want anything else. Wanted to struggle and feel it force down. All the random pangs in her stomach. It gnawed. She thought of choking. Of Billy finding her.

Slowly, she tapped it back down. Tried to just breathe through it before knuckles rapped the door again.

“You have my pants.” Came the voice. Evie broke to laugh.

“Yeah, yeah.” She clicked the lock and let him in. No makeup and damp curls cascading all over her shoulders. “I’m starving. Breakfast? I can make...toast sorta.”

“That tone really convinces me. I saw a perfectly good waffle iron in there.” Billy rubbed his shoulder and caught her looking again. A beat before he explained. “Dad had an empty bottle in his hand when he swung. Busted the damn thing on me, okay? It’s ugly, don’t worry about it.”

She gasped, steering toward him.

“Did it cut you? He could have broken it on your head or-”

“Lucky break.” Billy joked, rolling his arm a little before he passed

her to snatch his jeans up and put them back on. "He missed my face. I can handle it. Just, let me worry about it, alright? I hate to see your eyes get all huge at me." Blue yawned and hopped off the bed to follow him before Evie went too.

"It frightens me more that you're so...causal." She spoke lighter, washing out Blue's dishes to fill them. Meows followed and Billy softened.

"I make a good breakfast, you want to help me out here?" Bright eyes flashed over his shoulder.

"We've used this thing like once." Evie chuckled. "Mix is above your head. I'll get a bowl." She clicked around to find one and set it out.

"I don't want to talk about my dad when I'm with you." Billy decided, eyes on the window above the sink. He tried to numb. "Okay? Evie, I know you hear things. I need you to pretend you don't. For me. Just..."

Broad hands settled on the counter. Submissive. Vulnerable. He didn't turn to see her.

"I'm allowed to worry still." She pointed. "But, I'll give you...space."

"Fair." He seemed the type to leapfrog the subject either way. Evie didn't want him to run. So she just stared at the lines of his back shifting.

Odd to see him so domestic. All velvet and sleepy. Making breakfast. Evie wondered about putting her arms around him. Kissing his cheek. Dragging him back into bed. Rolling around under cotton sheets.

Her head shook. *No. No. No.*

Billy loaded the hot iron with thick batter and clamped it shut. A hiss tapered off. The sound snapped her back.

"Hope you're taking notes."

“Definitely.” She chuckled. Figuring he spent a lot of time cooking for himself growing up. Evie stepped up next to him and licked her lips. Gathered the will to say it. “Hey, I, uh...like hanging out with you.”

Billy’s brow rose. Sly while he bit his tongue. Head tilting to boast.

“Getting all mushy on me, Angel. Look at you melting between my fingers.” He didn’t know the half of it. Lashes batted at her so Evie rolled her eyes.

“I regret saying it alrea-*mmff*. ” She had her chin cupped to angle it so their lips could collide. Palm sliding to her neck, a thumb drew a circle into flesh.

Evie drew out.

“Did you use my toothbrush? I taste mint.”

“Just the mouthwash.” Billy laughed at her, pecking between words. “I’m not an animal.”

“Debatable.” Evie’s hand went behind his neck to bring him back down. Tongue and teeth. Billy actually moaned. Pressed her back into the counter before she pulled out. “You’re gonna burn it.”

“Shit.” Billy jerked away to save the first waffle just in time before adding another. “Only care so I can impress you.”

“Sure.” Evie droned. They stood there in silence. Shared one space to make a warm breakfast. Peaceful and smelling of sweet batter. Warm and easy. Almost too easy. Eyes flicking to each other and away between steaming pulses.

“Syrup.” Evie strained to reach it and Billy brought two plates to the table.

“You gonna let me cook for you again?” He waited for her to take a bite. Humming blissfully.

“Oh, my god,” Evie cut another piece. “Okay, I’ll give you this. You’re full of surprises, too. Billy Hargrove can cook. He writes

stories he won't share in school and still gets not half bad grades. And he's the fucking Keg King."

"I think you finally find me interesting." Billy folded a huge piece in half and swallowed whole. Syrup dripping from his lips to be licked.

"Ugh, I-" They froze when the phone rang in Evie's room. Frowning, she cut her food with more ire. Billy shot her a look between bites. "I already know it's Heather."

"She's gonna get to you eventually," Billy noted, plate empty. Evie left a sliver out of habit and caught him eyeing it before she slid it to him wordlessly. Wondered what his eating habits at home were. He stabbed it with his fork and swallowed.

"I know. I just," Evie searched, "I can't right now." With some haste, she got up and took the plates away to wash them. Scrubbing harder than necessary as Billy came into the kitchen. Felt his eyes glare. "Hey, come over here."

Billy crossed to her at the sink. Watched Evie turn to grip the counter when he blatantly invaded her space.

"This close?" He winked.

"Just," Evie's breath hitcher sharper as she stood tall to see his eyes, "don't move for a second."

Fingertips drew up the hair on his forearms. The veins that pulsed. Danced over his collar gently, felt the heat of him through his tee. Billy just watched with his usual intensity. Evie avoided his eyes and touched him. Delicate caresses that rocked his soul apart.

One palm cupped the back of his head. Surged into bedhead curls. Eyes lifting to burn his. Billy gave this wanting, little sound. Leaned in for a taste, but she evaded him. Just to see his eyes cloud. Massaged his neck and pulled him down for a gentler kiss. Pushed her tongue out to taste him first. Sticky sweet maple. Earned another whine.

Billy inhaled against her. Let Evie have some control and worked to

earn it back. Made another breathy sound before he palmed her bottom. Grinding into Evie until he was picking her up to set her on the counter.

A squeal caught up her throat. She felt his muscles bulge and strain but he did it like she was nothing. Shock etched before Evie was reeling out to dart her eyes all over his expression.

"Told ya." He chuckled, pressing in between Evie's legs. Fingers tucked a blond curl aside before her voice stopped another oncoming kiss.

"Are we just going to keep doing this until one of us cracks?"

"Jesus Christ, Evie, we tongue fucked in the middle of the street. During a fight." Blue eyes glinted. "That was already the crack."

"I'm just thinking about...after." She searched for more words and none came.

"Too young to worry about the after." Billy leaned back to see her. "I think you want to feel good now and..." He leaned in closer, fingers dancing down her front. "I wanna be the person making you feel good. Pretty simple. Crystal clear. Yes?"

"Y-Yes." That hot iron hand slipped under her skirt. Billy ghosted their lips and heard Evie shiver at his touch. Sinful fingertips trailing up her inner thigh. Dangerously close. Admiring her unfurling.

Too pretty when lust blushed her cheeks that obscene red. Full lips opened. No sound came. She sunk into him totally. Stunning.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon.

"I just don't think you've had the right people making you feel so good, Evie." Billy's voice dipped to a baritone that always turned her to putty. "And the things I'd like to do to you. *Hm.*"

Lips touched the shell of her ear. Left little kisses that lingered in a uniform trail. Arms tightened around him. Felt his finger draw up the hem of her panties. Readied to curl under the fabric.

He leaned out for permission. For her to ask him for more because she wanted him just as bad. Billy had to hear her say it. The craving itched him deep in his stomach.

Evie wiggled in place and then she heard it when they locked eyes again. The unmistakable click of baby pink platform heels. Never had the damn sound filled her with such dread.

“Fuck.” They scrambled away from the counter. Lungs sputtering until Billy bumped into Evie in the dining room between the kitchen and living space. Craning to see the front door. Keys jiggled the lock. “My mother.”

“Hey!” Billy tripped as Evie pressed him out, both knowing they wouldn’t make it to her room.

“Under the table, I’m not letting her find out about...” The word died. *Us*. Billy actually laughed on his way under the table, hiding within the embroidered cloth. Evie sprang to attention holding her breath as Mona burst in. Fighting to get her key out.

“Evie!”

“Mom...” Evie flashed a smile and tried not to look all blushed and guilty. Like she hadn’t just had a boy’s erection pressed into her thigh. Like she wasn’t about to let Billy Hargrove fuck her on a counter after making her breakfast. “You’re home so early.”

“Oh, well we had this disagreement down there and I just also couldn’t stand how we left things...” Mona was gesturing aimlessly and setting her bag on the sofa, turning to see Evie before she gasped out. “Baby, what happened to your face?”

“Uh! I...slipped on the ice going down the steps. Really embarrassing.” Evie touched her brow.

“Sweetheart,” Mona came to kiss the wounded eye socket all better, “did you ice it well? I should have something that’ll cure that right up in my bag.” Manicured hands came to angle and see, tutting. “My poor thing.”

“It’s fine, really. I was just...” Evie trailed off as Mona hugged her.

Tight. “Mom, really I’m okay. What...What happened?”

“Oh,” she sniffed and laughed it off, “sisters disagree on silly things. They still love each other. And I just kept thinking about you here. I missed my baby.” Mona patted her cheek and smelt the air. “Is that cologne? Did you throw any parties while I was gone?”

“No, I did adopt a new kitten. She was...a gift from a friend. Blue.”

“I’ll have to meet the little devil when she wanders out.” A smile flashed. “No parties though, you know I don’t mind a few friends over. Maybe...a nice boy.”

“Mom.” Evie groaned.

“Swear on Dolly, no parties though.” Mona joked, sharp talons flicking toward the blonde country queen's framed face.

“I swear on Dolly. I...did try to make waffles. Craving.” Evie chuckled and slid into a seat at the table. Adjusted the tablecloth some.

“They don’t smell burnt, I’m impressed.” Mona went to her bag. “Ah, well, I got us all kinds of fresh supplies. Powders and dust. Candles. Oils. Gris-gris. Plenty of sage for the house. And you can’t snoop around my bag because I got you some lovely items for your birthday, missy.”

“Great,” Evie rubbed her temple and jabbed her sock-clad foot out when Billy’s fingers teased her leg, “listen, mom, about our fight-”

“What fight?” Mona paused to blink at her daughter, setting new candles up on the shelves. “Oh, that little tiff. Sweetheart, your father and I are still working things out. I didn’t want to tell you because...the thing is...he doesn’t want to see us. In fact, he’s been sending that money to ease his own consciousness and, I won’t accept it. We don’t need him. We have each other, that’s enough.”

Evie wanted to fight her mother on it. Watching the woman click around and keep busy by force so she didn’t have to face those pesky emotions.

This woman who was alive and who sang her songs and who brought cut up pieces of fruit into her daughter's room unprompted. Who made delicious meals and who loved and supported her, despite being overbearing. Despite not wanting to process the negative.

Not everyone had a person who loved them that deeply, but Evie did. So, she just nodded.

"No, you're right." Hands clasped. "I hope you had a nice time down there."

"Yes, it was just a full house and I missed you. That's all." Mona pressed her lips. "I like being back home."

"Me, too." Evie gave Billy another light kick for being a handsy shit.

"I'm going to get the rest of this stuff unpacked in my room and I might have a trip to the store. Never a lazy moment, honey. Do you need anything?"

"Ah, I can't think of any-" Evie hitched a gasp and covered it in a cough because Billy's head slipped between her knees. "-thing!" They clamped shut to keep him in place. Mona blinked and gave her a shrug.

"Alrighty, dear. Well, let's say dinner tonight at six?"

"Six is perfect!" Evie pressed her lips, ready to burst at the mouth on her inner thigh. Teeth nipped and she reached under the table to tug for curls.

Mona flounced off to her room with the suitcase and Evie shoved out from the table the moment the door shut. Saw Billy's head perk, engulfed in the hanging cloth and looking too innocent.

"Nice orange panties. Little lacy."

She scowled at him. Lips touched her knee as an apology until Billy snickered and got pushed as he crawled out.

"What? I figured you sat down so I-"

"I was making sure you were covered, asshole." Evie hissed. "C'mon, you cannot be here. My mom can't know about us or...me with anyone, she'll lose her mind."

"You mean, she'll start ordering wedding cakes." Billy snuck back to the bedroom with her. Realized she had him by the hand. Evie shut the door and put on music so he could grab the rest of his stuff. "Window?"

"Probably best." Evie fiddled with her fingers and peered down. Shuddered to let the molten heat subside fully. "Sorry."

"Not my first grand escape." Billy got his jacket and boots on. Looked up from her bed and flashed a smile. "See you around?"

"You might."

"Swear on Dolly."

"Stuff it. Now shoo." Evie clasped those fidgeting hands behind her as he pushed the window up to climb over it.

Billy paused in the snowy grass when a palm covered his still gripping the edge. Blue eyes peered to see before lifting to her face, unable to read the expression or those huge, sparkling eyes that were ending him.

Unable to stop himself.

He craned to place his lips on her brow. A smile quirked and he had to face away from Evie for the first time. Something burst open and overcame him. Rendered Billy into a daze. Painted new iridescent colors he'd never seen before.

Fingers curled together. Drawing the connection out even still because they couldn't look at each other. Something else might crack and neither would come back from it.

"Why'd you do that?" Evie sounded out with no air.

"I felt like it." He shifted the toe of his boot into frozen slush to hear grass crunch.

“Your lips are soft.” Evie peered aside. Butterflies landing within her stomach. For once, it didn't feel empty or like it was weighed down with jagged stones. “I meant what I said about going out. Me and you.”

Me and you. Sounded so saccharine.

“I was gonna hold you to it, don't think I forgot.” Billy peeked to see her and they managed to share another beat.

Whatever cracked seemed so worth it.

Evie felt the cold seeping in around him and didn't let his hand go. Didn't want to because he was letting her see him and touch him. Billy thought of when he was a little boy and his mother took him to see a play.

Romeo and Juliet. Lovers on the balcony. It seemed silly up until this exact moment where she looked so exquisite.

Billy longed to create stories with such a hold. Things that distracted from men who hit. Things he could project himself into so others could see inside his chest without it hurting.

One truth became so clear. Evie didn't hurt.

"Evie."

"Yeah?"

“Are you waiting for me to change on you?” He kept her gaze steady. Thought he saw her eyes well for one second.

“Honestly, I don't know what I'm waiting for these days. A charge maybe.”

Billy looked amused, stretching toward her to settle their foreheads together. Tilting.

“I've heard you sing, Angel, draw it yourself.” He came back. “And talk to Heather.” Billy slipped from her hand and it pained him. It actually collapsed something under his flesh. “Sad eyes are killing

me." He plucked for a cigarette to light up. "You might just kill me, you know that? And I'd let you."

Evie was lost in him, too.

"Billy."

"Hm?" He gave a sly turn and she bit her lip, picking up Blue when the needy kitten crawled to her for affection.

"Promise me something." She cocked her head, dark locks bouncing in the clear daylight. Billy curled a fuller smile at her.

"Think I won't do just about anything for you at this point?"

"Just promise me you won't change," she said, "after."

"So you admit we're happening?" He teased and Evie got flat. A finger drew along his chest. Eyes steady. "Cross my heart."

Evie shook her head with a smile and started to shut the window. *Such sweet sorrow.*

"Hey, flash me for the road." Billy got vulgar.

Never mind!

A huff before she smacked the window shut. Billy laughed on his way around the Hargrove house. Neil's car was gone to work. Thankfully.

Susan prepping a meal in the kitchen. Eyes lifted to see the boy still grinning to himself like he held a secret close to his heart.

"I like that song." She mused, chopping carrots and celery. Billy skidded to face her in the doorway.

"Huh?"

"That Irma Thomas one you were just humming." A smile followed. "I played it on the cello once. When I was younger. Did you know that?"

"No... Uh, must've been the TV playing it though." Billy hurried to his room, passing Max with some headphones on so he made a point to flick them off for fun.

"Jerk." A red scowl followed him as he ruffled her hair and went along. Blissfully uncaring. "Ugh."

Not missing a beat, Susan went back to her prep. Considered the reality that her stepson was on the cusp of first love.

** ** *

Evie mulled over her phone the next afternoon. Staring like it might come alive and solve all her problems. If only.

Blue hopped up for some pets that were granted. Purring encouraged Evie to pluck up the receiver. Dialing before she smacked it down.

"C'mon, just..." Evie winced and tried again. No answer. She ignored four calls the day before. Frowning, Evie settled the phone down and stood up with Blue. Heart falling.

And then a ring. Evie didn't wait for it to end.

"Hello!" She blurted.

"Evie!" Heather matched in enthusiasm.

"...Hey," Evie sank down holding the kitten to her chest.

"Hi," Heather lost what she was about to say and sighed, "can we maybe talk somewhere?"

"I'd...I'd like that." Evie searched, licking her lips.

"I, ugh, went for a walk into town. Want to meet at our cafe?" Heather sounded out, breath spreading cold in the booth. "I'm on a payphone."

"Sure. I'll be there in ten?"

“Right...right, I’ll see you, I...” Heather welled. “I’m so sorry.”

“Let’s just talk when I get there.” Evie sniffled. “I’m not mad anymore. It’s stupid. It’s not us.”

“O-Okay, I’ll see you in a bit. I’ll order your favorite.”

“Thanks, Heath. I’ll hurry.” Evie smacked the phone down and let Blue go to wander. “Mom, I’m going to meet Heather!” Hands yanked her boots and coat on.

“Leftovers in the fridge if you get hungry tonight!” Mona came out fixing her hair in a cocktail dress. “I’m going to meet some friends. Be home later, don’t wait up for me.” Evie stared at the little silver dots decorating her mother’s dress. The sparkly earrings she was putting in.

It was clearly a date.

“Sure.” Evie turned away to go into the cold, shutting the door behind her. Tried to pretend her mother wasn’t another fifty logs on the fear of dating Billy Hargrove fire.

Barely catching the bus at the end of the road, she made it to the opposite side of the main street in no time. Hands stuffed into her pockets while shoulders hitched at the rush of cold. Evie shivered and got to the crosswalk, eyes lifting to see the orange hues inside the little coffee shop.

Heather in the window checking her watch with two drinks steaming and ready. Eyes lifted and brightened upon seeing her friend there. A smile crossed before she perked to wave.

Evie brought her gloved hand out to mirror it. Light as a feather.

A weight looped her wrist. Miraculous and dragging. Evie thought she might sink into concrete. A hand attached to a stumbling drunk.

It was Tannen’s eyes that shook her. Full of vitriol and rage. Enough to poison anyone. The back of her tongue burned with it. Evie suddenly couldn’t speak there against a harsh rush of winter wind.

“Fenny. Girl, I was just thinkin ‘bout you.” Tannen smiled all sloppy and he still looked so hateful.

“Let me go, Brock.” Evie tugged back against him there at the crosswalk.

“Just wanna talk. Like we did in that closet. When we hid from the storm together. Was nice.” He made this odd sound. A scrape in the back of his throat. Evie realized he was crying. Unsure why it frightened her more. “Never told anyone else what we talked about, did you know that?”

“You’re drunk, you need to go home.” Evie leveled out. If his emotions went any higher, they’d burst.

“Evie!” Heather called across the street. Jogging over as Brock yanked her further along. Into his much taller body. “Hey!”

“We’re just talking, Holloway, don’t get your thong in a twist.” Tannen pulled a flask from his pocket and gulped, spilling sour alcohol on them both. Evie wrinkled her nose and really began to fight because he was yanking her toward his shiny new car. Already a dent in the side.

"Get your damn hands off her!"

"Maybe when I'm finished!" He craned toward the other girl.

“Let go of her,” Heather grasped for Evie’s arm, “you need help.”

This manic smile crossed his face.

“It’s why I’m talking to Fenny, here. She’s just s-so fucking helpful. Pretty pillow for the world to land all its shit on. Aren’t you, girl?” He dropped his flask into the top-down car and pinched Evie’s cheek, got smacked off as she struggled. “Just understands shit. So, we’re gonna go somewhere and talk like we did that night. Think about it too much and you fucked me up. You’re gonna fix it.”

Muscles burst when he plucked Evie up by her elbows and carelessly threw her into the backseat over the door.

“Stop it!” Evie scrambled up to crawl out as he pushed Heather around. “Just stop.” She got out so he went for her again. Playfully hugging her into his chest. Brutally intoxicated. No one walking the streets to help at the late hour.

As if they'd try. Fucking people in this town. Minding their business when actual shit goes down but running for the dirty gossip.

“You were right, girl, everything you said. Fucking sucks. All of it. But, you knew that.” He went on, eyes watery. “All this shit. It's not worth it.”

That gouged her.

“Brock, you need to let me go, right now.” Evie got wedged between him and the car. “You’re scaring me, do you understand that?” She dropped her voice. Got through to him. “I’m sorry, divorce is shit and parents can fucking suck. But, this isn’t going to make your life better. Destroying yourself and hurting others...just stop. You can stop.” Heather came to tug at him again and he seemed to flood back.

Evie felt him loosen up so she slipped out and away.

“You shouldn’t be driving.” She tried. Snatching his wrist to help and the hate poured out. Hot lava burning Evie before a shove sent her back into Heather's arms.

“Not over,” he muttered to himself, skidding around to get into the car regardless, “not over. Fucking Hawkins trash. Sick of it. All of it.”

“Brock, just-wait!” Evie felt Heather grip her wrist as he swerved off. “Fuck.”

“He’s losing it.” Heather pulled again. “Are you okay?”

“We should call the police, he could hurt someone...or himself.” She added, going to a payphone. “Do you have change?”

“Yeah...yeah.” Heather fished through her little wallet and Evie smashed some buttons. A couple of snowflakes fell as she hurried to speak into the receiver. Sky darkening above. One sigh followed

before she shrugged and set it down.

“He already has a DUI, this won’t end well.” She rubbed her face. “He was crying.” Like Fredrick. Huge, wet tears hitting cool skin. Hands pulling for more of her to still them.

They’re sick and twisted and hateful and this part of Evie still wanted to nurture. To make it better because she couldn’t make herself better.

“Are you okay, though?” Heather asked again, sweet as pie when she smoothed a snowflake from Evie’s cheek before it could melt away. Brown eyes flickered.

“Yeah, just spooked I guess.” Hands went back into her pocket so she leaned into the booth. “You?”

“Just glad he didn’t drive off with you.” Heather shook at the thought noticeably, using her sleeve to itch her nose before she held herself and frowned. “What...did you guys talk about in that closet? You know, before the fight?”

“I, uh, was pretty drunk so I don’t remember much actually,” Evie sidestepped out of the booth, eyes elsewhere, “it was over a year ago.”

Brock was an asshole, but these weren’t her secrets to share.

Evie got a few steps in before sighing ice to turn back to Heather. Stunning there under flickers of snow and stars reflecting in her big eyes. Glowing streetlamps. Hair piled with a baby blue ribbon to match her fuzzy sweater. Lips wobbling. Steady, Evie came to hug her tight.

“Not mad.”

“You should be.” Heather sniffled, squeezing her before pulling out. Fingers curling into Evie’s coat. “Listen, the whole thing was dumb. He was normal at the time, I didn’t know he was such a jerk. I just asked if he’d met you and figured you guys might have something in common. I was drunk and maybe vulgar. I’m sorry.”

“We did, ah,” Evie caught herself, “you were just trying to be a wing-woman and I...I get weird about that stuff. I’m still coming around to the idea of being...desired. I don’t know. Let’s just go inside.”

“Ugh, you’re hot, Evie, you are!” Heather smacked her ass as they turned to walk off. Evie jumped a mile into the air giggling which Heather mirrored. Arm slung over her shoulder. “The updated wardrobe was only the beginning. You’re the whole package. Smart. Talented. Hell, you have the Keg King on your line. Just admit you’re a tough bitch already and you deserve only the best.”

“I have him on my line because someone gave him my number. What happened to busting his balls for me?”

“Well, I can make an exception if he makes you smile like that.” Heather teased. “Come on, I bet our drinks are cold.” They went into the cafe to leave Brock and his deranged expression behind. Back to the table after Evie waved at Jesse near the register. “Just got us a hot chocolate, figured we could use it. I can get us another if-”

“It’s fine, Heather, let’s just sit.” Evie slipped her coat off and exhaled.

Behind her eyes, pictures flashed to blind. These snapshots of Fredrick shoving her into bed the same way Brock pushed her into that car. Brown hair slipping over sheets before fingers tugged at her clothing. Standing too tall over her until his shadow cast to shroud her soul. Evie felt lost to so many shadows before him with twisting smiles and thunderous claps.

A hand pushed into her chest to level the speeding heart and weeping lungs. Willed them to be still and lie down as Heather started to speak. More apologies.

Evie brought her sweater higher to cover herself. Tugged the sleeves down. Wanted to curl up in too much fabric and drown in a dream of silken sheets and falling begonia petals. So no one could see her skin and burn it.

Her breath drew tighter, closing in around too many clacking

objects. Gemstones and keys. Red pushpins like cherries and that one safety pin that definitely opened on its way down. But, she'd been good again. Things would just come out. They had to.

They had to.

The things we put into the world come back at us. It worked both ways.

"Evie, you're shaking." Heather paused to touch her hand and Evie almost lunged back.

"I-I...I'm okay." A smile cracked too wide. "Just Tannen." Evie sputtered this breath like a broken fan, head shaking. Another smile. Even wider. Cheshire cat grin full of whimsy. She gulped and forced the chocolate down. Chalky into her stomach. "Did...Carol hurt you during that fight?"

"Almost pulled my earring out but I got some hair," Heather tilted to see Evie's face, "don't see much of a mark from that slap. You really gotta stay out of fights, Fenny, you'll give Billy a run."

"Don't I know it?" Evie watched Heather sip and peer at the little fireplace in the corner. "Mostly just shocked and I fell right into Tommy." Evie rubbed the corner of her eye. Started to breathe better with her friend here.

"I still...feel bad about--"

"Don't beat yourself up, Heath," Evie peered at the frost spreading along the windows. Near ready to obscure the world. Hide them in a warm little corner. "I don't want that for you."

"I put you in danger, Eve. I did that." Heather frowned again. Took a shaky drink.

Evie didn't have the heart to tell her best friend that danger was an old love whose arms she'd always walk into willingly. Body and soul. That she felt here when her heart panged at danger's shadow and weight looming over her shoulder. Spilling to eat her right up. Weighting her into a damp sheet. Again and again in the same room that held her hostage.

“Guys like Tannen put us in danger,” Evie decided at last, “not the other way around.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for reading and supporting!!
Chat with me below or on my tumblr, Alias-
B.tumblr.com xoxo :)))

15. Fires Within Fires

Notes for the Chapter:

I was excited to post this one! Billy continues to learn secrets about Evie as they grow closer. The first day back to school arrives with new challenges. TW: talk of teacher/student relationship, vomiting, pica, bullying, and some Well Earned Smut.

Billy decided he liked unwrapping these layers to Evie, despite the fucking interruptions.

Their little game of back and forth where even grazing her skin with his fingertips felt like a prize.

Where a glimpse of her smile's ghost sent luna moths fluttering inside the glass jar that he'd long-sealed his beating heart away into.

He certainly couldn't tell her she'd consumed him. Syllables became harder around Evie. No amount of cooing at his mirror would save him from those painted eyes. Brushstrokes that destroyed him utterly.

And all he could think was *brush me again*.

The greatest mystery presented itself that Saturday night.

Mona stayed out with friends and went home with something a little more chiseled. Which meant she'd be out and go straight to the salon to play with the books. Blue was fed. The stars were bright and silent. Placed just so.

Evie applied a red lip, bent over the vanity before it reached eleven on the dot. With her mother out, she used the front door after grasping her coat. Green bomber covered in patches. Crept over the frozen grass and pavement toward a hippy sort of van. Tan with a maroon stripe.

Billy crawled out his window at the sight of her along the way. Dressed. Head down as he hid near his car.

He had to know.

The van was already driving off so Billy waited a bit to follow behind it. Hoped the few cars on the road would mask him if he stayed far enough away.

He trailed after the damn thing all the way to the city. Saw it still in an alleyway and swerved to find parking elsewhere. Waited a few minutes with his eyes on the rearview mirror to see lights flicker.

Beyond the cold buildings, a cozy nightclub illuminated. Covered in trellises with twisted metalwork roses and thorny vines. Slicked in frost. A red, ornate canopy and steel black gate lining the outside area with empty tables.

Music vibrated within. Billy lit up a cigarette and watched the door. Eyed a bouncer chatting it up with a group outside in the cold. Smoking and shooting the shit. He readied to make his move.

The sign read *Sugar Kane's* in swirling lights.

Boots carefully stepped around the alley. Eyes trained on the bouncer at the end of the street corner. A thrum of piano keys echoed. Billy slipped into the door, down an immediate tunnel of high steps into another world made of pure red velvet.

Wall to wall velour curtains and uniform lines of crystalline lights. Felt like Billy stepped into a dim, smoky dream. Busy round tables with idle chatter and even a bit of friendly gambling. A dance floor with plenty of couples. Sleek black bar and mirrors behind it.

Taste and class and care went into this dream.

Billy fell into a table in the back, darkest corner. Watched the slow dancing. Heels clicked. More people drank and smoked at tables. Playing cards and speaking in hushed tones under the music.

The music.

As couples swayed and parted, Billy's eyes lifted to the band. Bass, drums, and keyboard. And the singer looking like a chandelier painted red like the walls. Red like the blood boiling and pounding

under his flesh.

Slow and steady, a pure blue light bathed. Made her the center of the universe. Let her slip into a warm bubble bath birthed of the cosmos itself. Billy had to scan her again. Had to blink to make sure he was seeing this correctly.

Sleek dress of beads like what a flapper would wear. Glossy red lips sultry into the mic. Huge lashes. Bigger curls.

Evie.

Her hips moved against the swell of sound. Breathing in and out with it. Stage lights framed her body. Kissed it. Made her glimmer as an ethereal creature. Not of this world.

Billy's jaw was on the table.

"This is a man's world," she cooed, head shaking while brown eyes fluttered closed, *"this is a man's world..."*

Billy's fingers twisted into the tablecloth. Eyes trained as her voice picked up against the reverberations. Filled the air. Filled the empty spaces around Billy. He'd heard her sing, but this starlet wasn't the delicate songbird she came off as. She owned the air. The space. The stars. The world at her feet.

She owned everything. She wasn't sorry.

"But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl." Evie plucked up the mic to come forward. Smiling when hands dropped dollars into a bowl she shared with the band. Her voice grew. Boomed. Curled around throats and hearts.

Enthralled.

That stage was where she belonged and she wasn't sorry about that either.

Bathed in the echoing ruby glow from seas of crimson velvet and black silk around the room. Spotlight pulsing technicolor. Painting in blues and pinks and reds. Utterly decadent. Small chandeliers hung

down to sparkle against cherry hardwood that met the vibration of a musical crescendo.

Evie's dress flicked about as she moved. Tiny knit shadowy fishnets and strappy heels. Miniature white flowers woven into her free spun curls that truly made her look like an angel. A glowy star. The light caught a collared necklace she'd made with a cameo brooch and loose jewels.

Again and again, Billy let himself be consumed. Bowed to her voice ever-growing. These untouchable notes that wrung around his soul.

"But it wouldn't be nothing!" Evie's head tipped back. *"Nothing!"* Mic high with the greatest note that stilled the entire room as the music hushed so she could shine. Obscene and shameless and so bright. Eyes lifted from tables to see her there beckoning like the sirens of old. Evie came down to look out, settled the mic on its stand. Romanced it. *"...without a woman or a girl..."*

Billy sat there and watched the set. Eyes all over Evie without her knowing. Blissfully unaware of the boy in shadows. He smoked a slow cigarette and no one from the bar bothered him. Not yet.

Evie was five songs in before they switched it up. Let the band take on some peppier instrumental so Evie left to cross to the bar. Billy thought to flee before a huge hand touched his shoulder.

"You look a little young to be in here. Not drinking. Where's your ID, kid?"

"Hey, I'm eighteen." Billy sounded childish, snuffing a cigarette out on a clean ashtray. The bouncer glared down at him. Bodybuilder type and pretty. Tanned with styled slick hair and little strands tumbling into his brow. Blue eyes. One ear framed in silver piercings. "Just listening to the girl, she...she knows me."

"Yeah, yeah, let's go, stalker. She's working." The bouncer coolly plucked Billy up like he was a doll. Catching the attention of the bar as they stumbled toward it.

Evie reeled out of her conversation before Billy Hargrove was

presented to her. One shoulder high into the air as a muscled hand held his arm.

“Does *this* belong to you, Eve?” He began, giving Billy a jostle for good measure.

“Oh, god.”

Billy flashed his brightest smile. Begged to be claimed like a little, lost puppy. Poor Evie could only groan. Elbows on the sleek wood to hide her face. The woman she’d been speaking with behind the bar was already cackling. “Yes...he’s mine.”

“Is this the boy you won’t shut up about?” Came a quip. Gravelly, feminine voice.

“Told you, I know her. Lemme go, Lurch.” Billy ripped himself clean from the bouncer. Fixed his jacket.

“Marlon, baby, we got him from here.” The barkeep continued, bringing one acrylic nail to her plump lips. Dolled to the gods in a Marilyn Monroe type wig of platinum, buttercream waves that swooped to frame her face and touched her glowing shoulders. Sapphire cocktail dress cinched in and flowed to knee length. Matching heels that made her a head taller than Billy.

“Whatever you say, honeybunch.” Marlon gruffed and went back to go up the steps. Evie shoved at Billy and grabbed his jacket.

“What are you doing here?” Her classic hiss.

“I wanted to know where you snuck off to two nights a week. Just a concerned neighbor.”

“Sometimes three when we have the stage open.” A hand adorned in a huge diamond ring extended. “Looks like James Dean and Jim Morrison had a blond baby boy. Little Eros crawled out of a Def Leppard video.”

“Billy.” He shrugged out of Evie’s grip. Left her making that signature scrunchy face of anger she was known for. Arms crossed at him. Pride rose so he boasted. Took the bejeweled hand in both of his

to kiss the knuckles smelling of jasmine. "Evie's favorite subject."

"Are not." The retort clipped.

"Don't tell lies, Evie dearest, they cause wrinkles." A wink of huge false lashes followed. "Iris Lee Arden. I manage the place for the owners. Evie's never brought us a pretty stray before." She gave Billy's chin an affectionate brush. Nails painted to silver claws.

Iris moved like a feline. A trans woman with brown skin and a full figure. Thirties. Commanding presence. Love of Marilyn Monroe with roots in the art of drag. Billy spotted a sign behind her about the specials. Chalked in different colors. A variety of musical stylings. Another sign about the shows nightly. Thursday being drag night.

One of those open places he figured. Accepting of all colors and sexualities. Safe haven to outcasts. California had them too. Seemed more of a rarity in this area. Double the bouncers of the places back home.

"Evie's telling people about me, huh?" Billy leaned into the bar to play the flirt. Evie's hand covered his mouth.

"Ignore him. He should not be here. I'm sorry."

"Says you who lied about your age for the job, sugar." Iris teased, eyes flicking to Billy. "We found out like the day after. Obviously."

"I was in it for the free booze." Evie beamed a smile, hand snatching from Billy when he licked her finger. "Gross." The pink tongue caught between his teeth before he grinned.

"Uh. Nice try. I don't even drink the alcohol for free, girl. And the only thing we ever give you free is a Shirley Temple." Iris laughed again. "I'll get two going while you lovebirds work things out."

"We're not, ugh..." Evie rolled her eyes and decided to sit. Huffed for effect. "So, you got me."

"I always do." His dangling earring caught the light. "Not a bad place. You ever sing on Thursday?"

"No, but I did host a couple of shows for Iris. The girls love me and I love them. They taught me plenty. Helped me. And I...learned a lot about myself too." Evie kicked a stool out so he'd join her. Paused to see his expression. Her lips quivered. "Would it bother you if I think about girls and boys the same?"

"Did it bother you when I flirted with that Jesse guy right in front of you? More in common, Angel. It's adding up." Billy held her eyes steady when he said that. They shared this softer beat. Simple and clean. Plenty of room to breathe. He shifted, lashes batting. "So, this place. Start from the top."

"I was sixteen and I saw flyers so...I sorta lied about my age. No one knows. Not Heather, not even Fredrick. They found out I lied quickly. But, they liked me so we worked out some rules and I just sing a few nights with the band. Couple songs. Great guys, too. The Starlighters. They're here almost 24/7. Marvin on bass, he drives so they pick me up on the way most days. I have to hide in back, I don't want to get them in trouble. Cops will treat them differently cause they're not white. Always been that way."

Billy noticed most of the people in here, including the workers and band, were people of color easily. Many mixed like Evie.

Opposite of Hawkins. She and Tommy H were practically the only mixed kids in their classes since his birth mother was Hispanic. Strange thing neither of them addressed in the open.

"The club runs all sorts of music. Jazz, rock, classics, and some pop. I like the more rock and pop nights cause I can bring my guitar. Sometimes I help back up visiting bands. This place just appreciates it all. I love it here and I can sing anything they need, it's like a second home. Accepting. Good for people who get the fuzzy end of the lollipop." She shrugged and two bubbly glasses were set down. "Thank you, Iris."

"Owners have more musicians coming in toward spring so hours for you will be slim. Summer should be better, they might have some more day and evening gigs." Iris perked a smile.

"I get it. Easier to work during the day when I turn eighteen." Evie

sipped. "The best birthday present of all is more of that stage."

"It's happy to have you, sugar. So, tell me, Billy, have you locked this girl down?" Iris plucked up a clipboard to make some inventory notes, elbow on the bar.

"Hey!"

"I'm working hard on it," Billy winked and that was enough to silence Evie.

"She also told me you're the one who took care of the shithead who gave her *that*," Iris tilted Evie's face. "Boy is lucky I couldn't sink my talons into his eye sockets. Sick my guys and dolls on him." Billy barely caught the bruises under layers of color corrector and makeup. "Good boy."

"I do what I can." He shrugged and played with the straw of his drink. Evie could have blamed her blush on stage lights. Instead, she stole a sip when Iris offered a fresh glass of water.

"I'm gonna go sing." She pushed Billy's arm. "He's a compulsive liar. Don't listen to him."

"Don't worry, Eve, I'll babysit the pretty boy. Make him feel right at home. It's what I do." Another wink and Evie groaned all the way to the stage. Rejoined the band with a red smile. Sparkling. Garnered a few claps and nodded to pick up the next song. Beaming.

She found Billy's eyes for one fleeting moment.

"The French are glad to die for love..."

"She's gonna go far, that one." Iris caught his attention. "Just needs a chance is all. Someone bigger than me to give it."

Billy's eyes were glued to the ruby supernova whirling and bursting before his gaze. Felt the vibrations inside his ribs. Again and again.

"You take the stage too?"

"Oh, yes. Never too late. Prefer to manage these days. Guide others

starting out. Lots of queens and questioning tweens in the city in need of a place. I like to give them one. Outcasts who need to learn they're not alone in this big world. I've had plenty of success and now I have dreams of managing one great star."

"My dad would hate all this." Billy piped up aimlessly, head shaking.

"More of us than of him, if you believe it. Just have to speak up. Scream it out." Iris cleaned a couple of empty glasses. "You're pretty. You could do drag, you know?"

"Thanks." Billy broke to chuckle, eyes turned back at last.

"Don't hurt my girl either." One long nail pointed. A talon that tapped Billy's chin. "We'll take you out back and smack you around a bit."

"Maybe I'm into that, lady." Billy flirted back. His insufferable self. The pretense lowered. "Already hurt Evie. Trying not to do it again."

"You're young. So is she. You both will fuck up, that's life. Sometimes people hurt more when they're comfortable. Just make it right." Iris had offered, arms back in the bar to sigh.

"Sometimes I don't know how to do that," Billy blinked his gorgeous eyes, "make it right, I mean."

"Watch. Listen. *Learn*." She cooed softer. "It'll do you good. Be a gentleman too, offer my girl a ride home when her set is over. Short night. I assume you're staying?"

"Yeah..." Breathless, he marveled. "Yeah, I'm staying if she is."

Evie had a few more songs before the mic was turned over. Something sinking every single time she had to see it go. They split tips and she parted ways for the night. Offered the shortest hours of all the workers being so young. Schooling first, Iris always said.

Bundled in a jacket, Evie pushed through some beads and curtains to see Billy waiting. Head cocking toward the exit.

“You stayed.”

“Why wouldn’t I? Drove all the way here.” He lit up a smoke outside, having not had many during the set. Music lingered behind them. Echoed along the cool winds and wet pavement. “Free show and all the Shirley Temples I could suck up. I did tip, by the way. All the pretty people I could flirt with and brag about my girl to. What a night.”

He slung a lazy arm around Evie’s shoulders. Not looking at her. His girl. Smoke flitting out his lips and Evie lost all her thoughts. Lost the nerve to tell him he was so beautiful. That she could be his. He shifted closer to her and peered at his watch, trapping Evie into his chest.

“Damn, it’s just after two.”

“Couple times I stayed till four.” She lamented. “Guess I should be happy they have room at all even if it’s once a week these days. Iris is good to me, I’m loyal... What did you guys talk about?”

“How pretty the stars are at night.” He mused, snuffing his cigarette out onto a brick wall before he paced to the car waiting. Evie slid in wordlessly, sighed when Billy got the heat on before she buckled.

She also noticed he did it too for the first time since riding with him.

“Usually I’m wired after shows but I’m dead tired tonight,” she rubbed her head to moan, leaning back.

“You had a long week.” Was all Billy said, swerving down the street to the freeway.

This heavy silence hung in the air. Billy intent on the road. Idle glances that never matched up. Finally, he peered over and saw Evie’s head lulled aside. Fast asleep.

A smirk crept.

He turned some easy music on. Let her rest all the way to Hawkins

and parked at his house. Turned slowly and brought his knuckles up against the apple of Evie's cheek. He felt her shift into his touch and reeled back. Evie seized up, groaned to see him.

"We're back." He whispered. Not sure why.

"Hm, sorry. Dozed off there." Evie felt for the handle. Also felt Billy's eyes on her skull. She froze and blinked to see him. "You want to come inside?"

"Easier than sneaking into my place. Dad's a heavy sleeper, but he has Billy Fuck-Up Radar." He laughed and she didn't, pushing out. Evie staggered in her heels, holding herself so Billy crossed around in silence. They went up into her house.

"Gonna...bathroom. Wash my face off 'n change." She had this sleepy adorable way about that, petting Blue idly. Already tugging little clips from her curls.

Billy came to give the cat some attention. Heard the sink running and crossed back to Evie's room. Tucked his boots and coat aside. Sprang at attention when she came in wearing a long tee and cradling a bundle of clothing. Curls free and messy. The slightest smear of black makeup still under her eyes but the rest of the paint came off leaving her fresh-faced and glowy.

"Need to use it?" She gestured behind her and stepped aside, depositing her laundry properly. Blue eyes lingered before he went off. Wordless.

Evie let out the breath she'd been holding to sit on the bed. Back taut when Billy returned so she stood awkwardly. A quick movement that made him stop. Created a standoff. Eyes held steady. Expectant. She bit her lip and clicked the light out.

Somehow that made him feel safer to cross. Careful steps like he was approaching a skittish nymph. Stood inches away. Evie let herself cave in.

"Can I undress you?"

The words blurred.

Billy didn't hesitate.

"All yours." He watched her too pointedly so Evie looked aside. Reached to lift his shirt until he adjusted to get out of it. She got a look finally at the nasty red and purple welts on his shoulder. Healing yellow tinge. Clouds shifting.

Visible from the moon and streetlamps outside flitting through the blinds. A hand hovered but didn't touch and he just went rigid there. Let her look at him. Let her see every inch. The color splashed over his shoulder like spilled paint.

"Can I kiss you there?"

"Only once." He said so she swept over. Placed her lips on the flesh that was burning hot. Pecked too light and came out to see Billy's eyes close. They opened and she reached for his belt. Clicked to get it off before unbuttoning his pants. Billy hitched to shudder when she brushed him, easing his pants down over white briefs.

Slowly, Evie brought a finger to her lips. Tapped once and Billy obeyed. Claimed them without ceremony. Pushed into her body until they tangled back in bed. Adjusting so he could hover.

Aroused into a creamy thigh, Billy rocked easily between parting legs. Nestled there and heard her moan. Drowsy kisses as her hands slipped around his back. One arm braced by her head, fingers smoothed the curls aside.

"Can I look?" He uttered, hand inching under her shirt. Gazes locked. A pulsing beat.

"Yeah." Evie let her hands fall into the mattress. Billy pushed fabric up over her chubby stomach and naked breasts. Traced her flesh without shame and she felt it all melting away. Piles of insecurities shedding to drop like little weights hanging from her heart. Brown eyes lifted elsewhere. A quiet shiver followed.

Her chest rose and fell. Evie tried to stay alert and locked into him, but the sensation returned that sunk her down.

"Billy," she squeaked to still him, "I-I do want you."

That broad hand palmed her side.

“If you’re unsure, Angel, it’s a no.” He shrugged. “It’s okay. You’re tired. Doesn’t hurt my pride.” Eyes lingered on her face. Evie still felt so exposed there. Billy’s thumb rubbed a hot circle into her skin. He chuckled before pecking those waiting lips with ease.

“We could...I still want to... Do things.” Evie shuddered, swallowing to find the words. “Warm-up. Start slow. Small.”

“Little things you dream of me doing to you.” He leaned in again to taunt. Hips pushed into hers. “Wet your panties already.”

“Please, you leaked all...over me...” Evie lost the exact jab while he kissed up her neck. Tongue and teeth. His hand inched. Ever so slightly. She touched his knuckles, guided him higher to cup her breast. Billy moaned at that alone. Twitched like he might burst and wasted no time getting his tongue on her nipples.

“Taste better than I dreamt, that’s for damn sure.” He ran his nose over her sternum. Tormented her other breast. Let his teeth tug once. Twice.

Suckles until she bucked into him. Head tossed back to moan. Fingers curled into spun gold. Coaxed him onward. Billy kissed her all over. Tummy and back up again. Shifting, he moved over to straddle one leg, nudged her thighs to stay parted.

“Wanna spread you open,” lips ghosted, “touch you.” *Brush you again and again.*

Evie had his arm in her grip. Felt like two irons clinging. Slowly, she nodded, eyes huge and darting over his there in the dim light.

“I want to feel good again, Billy.” She gulped dry air. “Want you to make me feel good.”

He took in her expression. Pleading and vulnerable. Unafraid to want him in the open. Fingers rolled over her hard nipple and then slipped down under flimsy fabric he wished he could tear. Contained himself just barely at the feel of her. Soaked for him. Responsive to every little beat and sigh. Pride set fire to his marrow. Two fingers

pushed up into the bud, coated in arousal to stroke it.

"Like that?" He teased slow. Her mouth opened for his tongue in response.

Evie grasped desperately at the pillow under her head. Legs opened so he got off to curl next to her. Braced his head up with one propped elbow and offered lazy rubs. Drew it out until her thighs hitched to part wide.

"Hear that fucking sound you make?" Billy's lips touched her ear. "Fuck." He whimpered like she was the hottest thing on two legs. Made her feel coveted and sexy. Desirable. Slick sounds mingled with their breathing hurried. "I could listen to it all day and get off on that alone, you know. Musical girl. I could play you all night."

He kept kissing her, rendering Evie unable to articulate. Wanting him in little breathy sounds.

Fucking wanting him.

Evie twisted, hitching a gasp as her toes curled. Thighs parting wider because Billy was some sort of fucking wizard at this. This boy couldn't be real. Eliciting perfect notes out of her. One hand gripped the pillow under her head while the other clung to his bicep now. She felt the muscles bulge white-hot and loved it. Heard Billy breathing soft in her ear, lips trailing down her jawline and collar.

"You're so wet." Billy brought his fingers up to lick them. Pushed his tongue into her mouth after. "Taste so fucking good." Evie yelped as he slapped her thigh playfully. The words slurred into her lips. He slipped his hand back into her panties, played rougher, and felt her tense. Evie's lips opened into his to moan. Her legs bent up and spread for him. Bucking to meet his touch that was ending her. "Shameless, Evie, I like it."

"You talk too much." She had gasped, eyes rolling to shut. Breast jutting so he kissed them next.

"I don't think people talk enough during the act." Billy curled back into her. Supporting himself on one arm by her head. "Nothing like

seeing a pretty girl's face when I tell her she's gonna come so hard for me." She felt his shaft against her side, rubbing idly to make some friction. Leaking and wet. "So very hard."

Billy liked to play dirty, it kept his emotions at a safe distance.

Evie caved in.

"More... Faster, Billy." She clung for him. Neck exposed. Pulsing. Lips parting obscenely. "More."

A finger pushed inside with another following.

"Oh, fuck." Evie worked into his touch. Brown eyes finding his intent ones. Billy thumbed her clit in tune. Pumped a few times. Watched her chest rise and fall in shaky breaths. The shirt still bunched over her tits. Lips fell to suckle one rosy nipple then the other.

"Too much, Angel?" Billy slipped out to resume circling the bud. He hummed, slowing to inhale deep before he granted her another taste of his lips.

"Don't stop, I like it." Evie whimpered into his mouth. Caught his bottom lip in her teeth playfully.

"Couldn't tell." Billy sped up again. "Wanna see you come for me."

"Billy." Evie twisted at that. Thrusting herself into him. Breasts bouncing.

Slick, filthy sounds filled the room. The damn streetlamps glimmered around the curtains. Gave her almost no place to hide from him. Something churned in her stomach. Alert.

"I'm close." She strained at last. "I'm so..."

"I know," he grazed their lips to murmur, "just chase it. Don't run, Angel. That's it. Chase it for me." He watched her expression flutter and cloud. Loved it. Worked her relentlessly.

Nails dug into his skin. Out of breath and bucking until her body

gave a little quake. A moan followed. Drawing out with her climax. Billy rubbed her until she fell to pieces. Crying out and shuddering. All for him. Back curved to echo sweet delights. He didn't stop until she fell limp and quivering by the force. With Evie spent, he pushed up to reach into his briefs. Slicked his shaft in her arousal. Began to pump.

"Lemme see you." She slurred, turning over to tug his underwear down. God, he was beautiful. Lines cut down his hips. Trimmed gold curls. She bit her lip again and wasn't coy for once.

"You mind?" A suggestive eyebrow rose.

"If I can help." She pushed up more with heavily hooded eyes. Drunken. Messy kisses trailed his abs before she licked his tip.

"You just go for it, huh?" Billy added. Allowed her to swallow him down. "Fuck, that mouth you have, Evie." He bucked into her throat. Tried to apologize when she made a sound that was utterly pornographic. Heavy cologne wafted up her nose. A trail of spit ran from flesh to lips as she came out. Lapping again. Sinking down so he could pump. She gripped his hips and worshipped him. "You don't...You don't have to..."

"I like it when you feel good. You're so beautiful." Evie dipped out. Let Billy tilt her head up by the hair. Thumb slicking her swollen mouth. Billy curved to dip his tongue in. Groaned when she kept stroking. "Feels good to give pleasure. We have that in common, Billy."

His spine arched. Muscles taut because her lips were on him again.

"You look like a star, you know that?" Billy had to peer away. Sighing soft. Shuddering. She didn't lie about being skilled at this. Evie placed little kisses up and down. Slowed. He didn't have time to continue the praise.

"Where do you want to cum?" She resumed stroking him. Kissed shapes around his hips sweetly. Billy tried to articulate and gasped as her teeth nipped along his skin.

"You're asking me? *Shit...* You won't like it." He tried to not blow it all on her face. Felt like that might be rude. Billy shuddered again. "On your tits."

"Hm." Evie reclined back, let him scoot in and helped him stroke himself. Being dirty also assisted in keeping her emotions and insecurity at bay. She worked him with her slick hand. Felt him starting to lock.

"Listen, I'm not gonna last much...longer." He was thrusting into their palms. Leaned over her to grasp the pillows so she could finish him herself.

"It's okay. Just let go, Billy. It'll feel so good when you do." *Tease.*

"Fuck, Evie, fuck." Billy looked exquisite. Vulnerable. Eyes glittering with pleasure. Whining. Lips opened to groan. She worked him until release gushed. Milky spurts right across her chest. Billy swallowed for some air, looked down at her. Messy and fucked out. Shirt bunched up with his filth all over her skin. Puffed.

"Don't get mad, but I thought about that the first time I saw you." He twisted one nipple, heard her hitch to sigh. Evie fell back with a huff.

"Yeah, you made that obvious." She felt Billy sweep up some release with two fingers and offer it to her lips. Sucked him clean, peering through thick lashes. Evie laced their fingers and let a slow smile pull. "I enjoy you, Billy."

"Yeah?" He fell next to her. Nestled in so their curls mixed. "Only took you a couple of months and an orgasm to admit it."

"Shut it... I want you. Not trying to countdown to it like it's some rocketship." She pushed over him and felt under the bed for a dirty shirt to wipe off with. "That's all I'm saying. Foreplay is one thing. Sex always changes people. Maybe I'm...freaked about that."

"I enjoy you, too." He admitted to the dark. Eyes lifting to the ceiling before she tucked herself back in between him and the wall. "We could get a motel room sometime. Make sure no one walks in for

once. We'll be wide awake and go a few rounds. And I won't change on you."

"Hmm." She turned to muffle into his chest. Drowsy as can be. "Sure."

"Really?" Didn't expect a quick reply. "Not gonna take it back when the glow wears off?"

"Maybe." Evie teased, grinning into Billy's skin. "You make me mad sometimes. Still want to go slow like this." He chuckled with little air, chest steady until he adjusted so she could cuddle into him. Evie traced a heart into his flesh. Caught herself. "Can I have a ride Monday? I think Steve will understand... I'm just freaked out about going in."

A hand pushed her hair aside so they could look at each other. Billy played with lush curls. Got serious.

"He's not gonna be there."

"I know." Evie hummed with her eyes closing. Fingers in her hair lulled her further. "Sometimes I think I see him standing in dark corners. Even when I'm on stage. There's this glimmer of him everywhere. Especially as I close my eyes."

Billy didn't know what to say so he kissed her until she was breathless and distracted. They shifted around so Evie faced the wall, pulling his arm over. Thrilled him to pieces. Billy framed her body with his, lips melting into dark curls. Sweet blessings placed upon her crown. A protective barrier he hoped soothed her.

He really hoped.

The blankets pulled up so they twisted together. No more syllables followed until the morning birds began to sing.

** ** *

Monday crept to swallow Evangeline whole.

She donned a vintage plaid dress that was cinched with a belt and

short. Threw her bomber over it and fashionable black tights. Knew she was dressing for Fredrick even still. Her little outfits pieced together so he could imagine taking them apart in class. Earrings caught the light as she swung her bag on and crept outside into the morning windchill. Didn't want to keep Billy and Max waiting.

Just in time, they stalked out of the Hargrove house. This knowing smile crossed Max's face when she saw Evie.

"So, you're hanging out with Billy again." Came the monotone observation.

"Back seat." He snapped at her. Evie's lip twitched before a little nod followed and the redhead disappeared into the back. Snapping the seat in place for Evie to take. Without ceremony, the Camaro lurched forward to go. Billy fiddling with his radio and cursing all the hick stations until he found one at Evie's quiet recommendation.

"Is Evie your girlfriend now?" Max was leaning between them.

"I'll pull over, I swear to god, Max." He lifted his eyes with an aggravated breath, turning hard after the stoplight changed. Max snickered and Evie wanted to laugh, but didn't. Eyes darting at the many trees they passed until they began to blur. A sea of earthy tones and pure white frost pooling. Almost looked like chaotic, muddy ocean waves. Crashing.

Sensing the nerves, Billy's hand found her knee. Stayed there until they got to school. Thumb smoothing.

"See you two later." Chipper for once in the morning, Mad Max jumped out after them and raced down the hill to meet Dustin waving across the way. Evie huffed as he looked between Billy and her then asked Max an obvious question out of earshot.

Students moved all around them. Many pausing to glance at Evie Fenny appearing from the magical blue of Billy Hargrove's legendary Camaro. She didn't belong there. One hot orgasm wouldn't change that. Fingers curled into her bag's strap. Nervously twisting it.

"He's not gonna be in there and you won't feel better until you face

it.” Billy finished his cigarette against the hood. Eyes pointed.

“We could just skip.” Evie looked around at passing students and Billy came to her side.

“You do know how to tempt me. C’mom.” An arm swept around her shoulders. Nearby students took more frantic notes as they got down the hill so Evie wiggled from him. Kept walking and felt sick by the time they got to her locker.

“People are staring at us.” She faced inside and sorted books. Billy leaned next to her. Eyes flickering with this unreadable expression.

“I didn’t notice.”

Evie gave him this glance like she didn’t believe him.

"I don't care." Came the actual sentiment.

“I have to get to calc.” Evie dismissively shut the metal door and gasped when he kissed her. Right there in front of everyone. Billy cupping her cheeks. Making a point in his way. Cartoon confetti tumbling down. Students watched Evie stumble into the lockers. Billy Hargrove’s arm steady around her back. Pulling her into his body as if he wanted her and only her and nothing else existed.

“Clear enough, Angel?” He pulled out. Left her breathless. Unworried and wishing it was enough to unbind her nerves. A thumb fixed her lipstick idly. “See you in English. Don’t run.” Billy swept off. Students parting to let their king by. Evie shuddered to herself and hunched to hurry in the opposite direction. Cheeks burning.

Brush me again.

She didn’t learn much in her first period. Heather met her at the door and kept glancing the entire class. Carol and Tommy both skipped. That should have brought Evie some ease. Instead, she figured she might blow chunks.

The first bell had her springing up. Not even waiting for Heather as she disappeared into crowds. Shoving a bathroom door open so she could throw up her breakfast. Two eggs arranged with wheat toast.

Mona had spent the entire time prattling about some man she was seeing as if Evie were her best friend and therapist and not a soul she gave birth to.

Evie so often wondered if her mother had wanted her. Really wanted her. This life that stilled all her starlight, electric dreams. And not treated birth as a duty because *these things can happen*.

Luck was not on her side. Evie had passed Carol in there with a couple of other girls in her gaggle's orbit. Smoking and late to class. Too cool for it either way.

Bile and food exploded into the toilet bowl. A twisted clothing pin that was stuck somewhere it shouldn't have been came up too. Evie swallowed that a good while ago. Spots of blood pricked.

"Gross, Fenny, didn't know you were *that* type." Vicki sneered outside at the sound. Snickering followed. "Two fingers are better than one, precious. I hope you give Billy's dick better treatment." Footsteps followed and Evie didn't have time to be mortified. She figured they all left and gasped. Spotted a loose bolt in the wall.

Evie propped her head up and fumbled to unscrew it.

Heard voices that told her to stop. Just stop. She can stop. She can stop this at any time.

There rust.

It went down and Evie felt that sickly wave of calm wash. Rocked back to a distant shore and wiped her mouth on a wad of thin toilet paper. Felt disgusting. Gave her cheek a soft pat like a baby. Breathe. *Breathe*. Feet staggered out with her backpack to see Carol sitting on the farthest sink like it was a throne. Smoking still and far too elated.

Shame sunk its talons into Evie like Carol watched the entire thing play out.

Unable to even rasp, she went to the sink and washed out her mouth.

"Not preggers are you?" Smoke pooled up.

“Just sick.” Evie bit back, hands braced over the sink.

“About the party,” Carol continued, not listening as she snuffed out her cig against the mirror’s corner, “I was so drunk. Don’t take it personally.”

“Fine.”

“I just think it’s a fresh start today. New leaves. Right?” Carol dug around as Evie shuddered and tried to reapply her lipstick. The redhead approached. “Here.”

A stick of bubblegum flicked out. Evie eyed it suspiciously and Carol actually smiled. Glossy lips curling before she chewed her own piece. Blew a plush pink bubble for good measure.

It popped.

“Nothing funny. You need to work on those trust issues. Especially if you’re gonna hang with Billy. He gets around.” Her head cocked. “Don’t mind Vicki, by the way, Billy sorta dropped her unexpectedly. Hm. She was hoping to take him all the way to prom and only got one taste at Lover’s Lake. Poor thing.”

Carefully, Evie took it. Let the sweet flavor fill her rustic mouth. Didn’t mask enough.

“Thanks...”

“Anytime.” Carol went to the door and stopped. Lips smacked. Couldn’t hold it in any longer and let the glee flow. Red hair flicked. “So how does it work, you and Bowers, is it a grade thing? Are you just easy? I’m so curious because he seems like a guy who could get anyone. Billy, too. So, why you, Evie?”

The question that kept Evangeline up at night haunted the air. Carol grew relentless.

“Are you a witch of some kind? Could be comparing the young and old. Gross. Maybe you work well on your knees. I’d love some tips.”

Evie stared at the sink. Heard the bell blare signaling she was late.

A deafening silence followed.

"I don't..." She peered at Carol crossing her arms to smile. The gum went sour. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"I don't know if I'm grossed out or impressed, Evie," Carol faked a look of shock, "you really suck off our teacher. I mean, how pathetic do you have to be?" A nasty, faux scoff followed.

"As if you weren't leaning over his desk to press your tits against his back and hiking your skirts up all the same." Evie shot up. Caught Carol off guard by matching her malice. Easily.

Evie found herself shaking. Face hot. Eyes betraying her too well.

"But, I don't know what you're talking about. Leave me alone." She spat the gum in the trash and pushed out to go. Carol followed her down the empty hallway, skipping and loving this side of Evie that poured like tar.

"Does he at least buy you nice dinners? I bet he's flush with cash. Buys you things in leather and lace. Does he have a preference? I think lace. You're a dainty spring flower he plucks the petals from all for himself. Right?" Carol struck Evie with an arrow at that sentiment. "Is Billy jealous? Bowers is probably into the weird shit. You must be a real pro at-" Carol hitched to squeal when Evie flared.

Two hands plucking her up to shove her into the lockers. Breaths in sync, Evie found herself hissing. A fire built to pour and ravage. Warming them both. She leaned too close to Carol's face.

"Just, shut up." She trembled, teeth-baring. A silver tear fell down her cheek. Fingers warped into Carol's pink turtleneck sweater. The trapped girl actually reached up to catch it on her finger. Looked dreamily into the droplet like she was viewing a distant memory.

"Ah, you're actually crying. Like a little baby. You should start wearing a big red A, Fen. Bowers must love having a little baby girl around. Dress her up and *down, down, down.*" Carol sneered, glossy lips popping.

She dropped the pretense as Evie held her there. Let it all flutter.

Started to shatter silently. Evangeline wondered. She really wondered if what Carol Perkins saw in her that she hated so much was just herself reflected. Poor thing.

Poor things.

"You don't know shit about me." Evie managed. It sounded so unconvincing coming out.

"I know all these people around here are weak. They're so *fucking* weak." Came the spark. "But, not us."

Carol came in close. Added fuel to the fires. Did something peculiar and gave Evie this sickly sweet peck on the lips. Gloss and red mingled. She stole something she saw deep inside of Evie that she felt too. Got shoved back again when Evie recovered. Tongued her mouth after tasting the salt of more tears. Carol was welling now. Voice low. Starting to quiver. Evie's fingers left blushing marks on freckled skin.

It hurt and Carol loved that it hurt.

"It feels good, doesn't it? Real good. Pile that pain onto someone else. This. Feels better." Carol sniffled with budding fury. Waited for admission. She tremored and asked a question that killed them both. "What happens when we run out of silky petals, Evie, huh? What the fuck do we do then?"

Tears shed, they didn't cleanse.

"I d-don't know, Carol," Evie released the thoughts and mourned it deeply, "but, I think about it every single day."

Disgust welled. Evie thought of Fredrick grabbing at her. Seething to keep their secrets locked at any cost.

Wheels within wheels. Turning endlessly.

Fires within fires.

She dropped Carol and stalked off. Proud like Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*. Fleeting temptress with dominance and power for days like Abigail in *The Crucible*. Heroines and villains and virgins and whores

and martyrs. None of them win.

Women were always packaged just so. The world seemed to prefer that. All these stories Fredrick made her read and reread until she took them into her soul. Lolita who always gets the blame she never deserved because she was young and a victim and no one cares about that. *Why don't they care about us?* They care about how she was prepackaged by a society that never tried to save her.

No one cares or grieves why and how women are carved from pristine marble, only that it's their fault if they tarnish and crack. Their fault if they stumble and fall. No going back.

No going back.

White roses painted red. They never asked first.

Evie was a couple of steps away from the classroom when a mass of claws tore into her curls. Yanked her back so hard that her backpack fell off.

"Still pretending you're better than me, bitch! Admit it!"

Evie cried out. Alerted nearby classes. Thought of Fredrick tearing her down the same way and whirled with her hand out on pure instinct. Smacked Carol in the mouth. Froze with huge eyes. And Carol actually smiled. Bloodied teeth and sticky lip gloss. She looked like such a girl there.

"Alright, Fenny babe, I'll play the villain for you. Just like you wanted." Carol dove on Evie while classes began to pool out. They hit the floor and lockers rolling around. Not really landing punches or slaps. Just locked around each other shouting and tearing into clothing and loose hair. Both crying.

"Shit!" Billy, Steve, and Tommy shoved through the jeering teens to pull them apart. Chaos rained.

"Girl fight! Girl fight!" This school really reveled in such things every single time.

"We need help here! Ladies, enough!" The poor substitute in

Bowers' room was not having a great first day.

“Get off me!” Carol finally detached from Evie so Billy scooped her up under the arms. The redhead noticed Mr. Bowers wasn't around and stopped struggling. This cruel look twisted her face.

“Can't leave you alone for a second, huh?” Billy's voice brought Evie back into the shouting as she scrambled up with his help.

“You two! Principal!” Another teacher came between them. The useless security guard was just now jogging around the corner. Evie tore her bag up and passed Steve and Tommy. Carol was already stomping off. Something awful lighting her bones aflame. Red locks bounced and became fire.

Ushered away through crowds, they were put into a cramped room. Seated next to each other.

“Perkins and Fenny?” Their principal plopped into a chair with his secretary sitting in back to make notes. “I haven't had problems with either of you.”

Carol burst right there. Sobbed through the words.

“It's all Evie's fault! She slept with him and she's just getting away with it! She gets everything! I'm sick of it! I'm sick of all this and...and I want it to stop! I just want it all to stop!”

“Ms. Perkins, you're not being app-!”

“What if I told you it was a grown man, huh! Maybe someone who works here.”

“Liar!” Evie wretched over her chair to swat at Carol until they had to be forced apart again into separate rooms. A clock ticked. Blared in her ear and made her crazy while she waited. Tears streamed.

Carol was about to ruin her life. Drag all this shit back to the surface.

God, what would Mona say if she knew her daughter was an evil temptress?

Evie got into her bag for something. Anything to make it better. Nothing small enough to swallow at the bottom so Evie just rocked. Patting her cheek again to console herself. Bubblegum lip gloss still stained her red lips. No wiping it away.

Chief Hopper poked his head into the room ten minutes later, causing her to drop the bag and send her items everywhere.

Hester. Abigail. Lolita. Twisting goddesses. They all pay for it somehow. The narrative always makes them pay and they never had a chance to be anything else. Can't blame them.

Poor things. Lost to the fires within fires.

Books and papers flew out elegantly around her feet. Scattering away as Evie burst into harsh tears.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oof, sorry to end it there lads! More to come and thank you so so much for following as always. All the comments and kudos mean so much to me, I can't believe this fic cracked 3000+ hits!!! Leave some words below or on my tumblr, [Alias-b.tumblr.com](https://alias-b.tumblr.com)
xoxo

16. The Night Has A Thousand Eyes...

Notes for the Chapter:

Evie and Carol's fight comes to its final threshold. Secrets unravel between them and they realize maybe they had a few things in common. The shockwaves hit all the teens. TW: talk of past abuse/sexual abuse. Racism mention. Angst. Slight mental break.

I'd love to hear from you guys about the story so far, it's been a rough week and ty for reading. :))

Jim Hopper didn't expect to be starting his day with a teenage girl sobbing before him.

He figured at least she couldn't throw things with her mind.

"Hey, hey. Miss Fenny. *Evie.*"

It was too early for this. Jim shut the door and stepped closer. Knelt at her level. Evie cried like a baby. She didn't even sob in front of her own dad like this. Or Mona. As if the world really might end. They wouldn't like it. *Just think happy thoughts, Evie, chase the bad away.*

"Evangeline. Evie. Hey. You're not in any trouble. I just want to talk to you."

"Is...Is Carol okay?" Evie sniffled and tried to brush her unruly hair down. Wondered why that was the first thing to leave her mouth. Maybe she should just hate Carol. "What did she say?"

She hiccuped and Jim might have thought it cute if she weren't falling apart.

"I haven't talked to Carol yet, they just called me in. Said Miss Perkins made accusations. Security at this school is exactly as I remember." He tried to joke, but she only blinked at him. "You wanna tell me what happened?"

"We just don't like each other. We got into a fight." Evie kept wiping her face until he put a box of tissues into her hands. Still tender at her level despite the blaring gold badge that signaled authority.

"Her parents just got here, I think. I couldn't get a hold of your mom. My officer was trying her salon a bit ago."

"She's probably on her way to her shop from..." Wherever she stayed last night. Evie peered aside. Face blotchy and drained. Autumn toned eye shadow and black mascara dripping. War paint. "She'll be to work soon if anything."

"Take a couple of breaths. I'll chat with you more when she arrives. Alright?"

"Wait!" Evie snatched his hand as he rose. Saw the surprise flash. Tugged. "Don't believe her. Carol, she's lying. She's a liar. She hates me. She wants to mess up my life. She hates me so much. I d-don't understand. I'm not bad. I try not to be. The hate doesn't change, I just swallow more down. I have no choice. I don't know what's so wrong with me."

The sentiment cracked something in her expression. Had her wobbling to well again so Jim hushed that back in a hurry.

"Hey, hey. Easy." Hopper came down a second time. Let her cling before he sighed. Placed his free palm on her shoulder. "Just gonna chat with you both. That's it. Easy. Just breathe."

"Do you think I'm bad, Chief Hopper?" Evie had cracked instead. Rasping it. Huge, tears poured hot and fresh. Hitting their clasped hands. Jim's thumb made a soothing circle into her shirt sleeve. "I try so hard not to be bad or dirty or ugly a-and..."

My dad still left. My mother won't speak to me as a daughter. I can't get close.

Souls lashed out at Evie with hatred and ire. *I can't get close. I never will.*

A thought like that was almost too much to bear. Sometimes you

couldn't get close. Often it starts with others not letting you.

"I always think if people see I'm trying to be better. Trying to communicate, they won't be so mean to me." Teeth clenched. "Why do I make them all s-so angry? It's like I'm not real."

"I'm not angry." Jim offered softer, eyes flickering until he caught Evie's slowing gaze. "Do I look upset with you?"

"No." She swallowed. Wiping her nose. Eyes fell to his hand. Broad and tender as can be.

"You're not bad, kid. I've seen bad. I've seen worse. I've seen ugly and evil, too." The ghosts flashed there in his expression.

Evie looking into his tired face. Heard a little girl weeping gaspy sobs. Thought maybe she heard gunfire too and smelt smoke. Jim Hopper knew what burnt flesh smelled like. He knew what eyes looked like when they melted from a skull. Knew what it was like to lose the one soul he couldn't bear to see go.

"You keep trying and the people who matter; they'll see it." He continued. Gentle. "But, you gotta see it too. Do me a favor and keep trying. I promise you won't let yourself down if you try."

"O-Okay." She said. "I'll try."

"People are angry because they're unhappy. So when they see a beautiful, talented girl singing at the annual Fun Fair, for instance...they wonder why they can't be like her." He actually smiled a little.

"You remember that, Chief?" Her lip twitched.

Many in her class sang, but she knew she was the best. A blue-ribbon and fifty bucks proved it too.

It was the last time Evie knew she was best before her dad left home. The last time she saw her parents smile at each other.

"Yeah, you were the only one with a song from the 60s."

"Aretha Franklin. 'Respect.' That's what I sang." Evie sniffled and Jim figured he was calming her down.

"I remember it because you seemed a little angry. More so than I saw before in person." Hopper continued thoughtfully. "I always wondered why."

"Mayor Kline pulled me aside before the performance. Asked if I wanted to change my song because I wouldn't win if I sang something by a colored girl. His words. Not mine." Evie's accent came out at that, signaling some heat. "I told him that I was a *colored* girl too and she was the queen of soul. Then, I went on stage and I won his money. His decorated ribbon. And he had to announce the winning name of a mixed girl in front of everyone."

"Is that right?" He could have adopted this kid right there.

"People tell me I sing better angry. Passion, I guess."

"Was that girl on stage bad, or dirty, or ugly?" He asked then and Evie froze to look up at him.

"No, Chief, she wasn't." Another easy breath.

In ten minutes, Jim Hopper was more of a dad than Jack Fenny. But, Jack loved Evie. She told herself that every night before bed. That he was somewhere else still loving her. He was just busy making their living. They did plenty of happy things together. He smiled a lot and she tried to match it. Always tried.

When Jim Hopper smiled for her though, it was easier to follow through with one.

"Wait here for me. Alright?"

Evie let him go.

He left the Fenny girl there staring at the door. Crossing into the next room where Carol was sitting with the principal and his assistant.

The redhead wasn't budging either. She didn't crack. She didn't

acknowledge him as he pried from her.

Their principal had enough.

“Chief Hopper, can you please bring Evie in here? Miss Perkins is making some accusations. We’re just trying to clear it up.”

“She’ll just deny it.” Carol looked like she’d been crying also or trying not to. Same warpaint in pink and blue. Arms crossed and disheveled.

A magenta butterfly barrette hanging limp in her hair. Must have tugged painfully at strands.

Not trying to frighten her off, Hopper pulled it out and settled it into her hand. A peace offering. Carol appeared shaken and wide at him. Not used to such kindness. El always had a similar expression their first year.

Jim left then ushered Evie along to sit down in the corner minutes later. She and Carol stared at each other across the way. Daggers.

Evie waited for the world to turn on her.

“Ugh, is my daughter here?” A voice bellowed outside.

The Chief grunted and left to handle it. Carol’s anger melted and Evie saw a specific flash glimmer. Pearlesque almost. Strobing. Fear.

It struck so quick as lightning would. She could have missed it. Maybe others missed it too often as well.

“Why is *he* here?” She tugged her turtleneck even higher. “Where’s my mom?”

“They just got a hold of her. Your dad-”

“Stepdad!” Carol shot back at their principal. Stopping only to glare at Evie for staring hard.

“He’s a guardian, hon.” The secretary eased. Pushing a box of tissues at Carol that went ruefully ignored.

“How are you doing, honey, are you alright?” Carol’s stepdad, Jason, swung a ring of keys around when he came in. Pocketing them. Big, pallid guy in a black tee and jeans. Muscled and slightly portly in the stomach. Looked like he might have been handsome once in high school. Drugs did him in.

Jim stood at the door with his arms crossed and watched Jason sit in the opposite corner behind Carol. Seemed to know the guy because something stunk the air between them.

“I apologize, I came as quick as I could. Her mother actually won’t be coming.”

"I want her here-!"

“Carol, you’re making serious accusations.” Their principal began.

“I don’t want him here. I want my mom.” She hissed, tone changing. “It’s true. Fenny slept with an old guy and she knows that I know about it. He works here.”

“Carol-”

“I know because I’m sleeping with him too, Chief Hopper.” Carol sprang out. Sounding oddly desperate for the ears to heed her warning.

Evie only stared at her. Knew it was a lie. Stony and intent. Fredrick was a lot of things, but he never cheated. Not like he ever had the time.

Evangeline was his everything. His Lolita.

“He said he’d drop Fenny for me, that’s why she attacked me.” Carol sneered.

“She’s lying!”

“Fuck you!”

Chief Hopper shoved a chair between them, sat down.

“One at a damn time!” His voice rose and they sank lower. “Who is it you’re accusing of this, Miss Perkins?”

Carol stared at Evie again. Got smaller before she looked aside.

Evie only realized then.

She hadn't uttered Fredrick's name. All the blabbing and his name never reached her lips.

That gnawed.

“If I tell you, would you make it stop?” She dug nails into her sweater holding herself. Hopper opened his mouth and the door burst.

“So sorry, Chief, I just heard-ah...Evie?” Mona came to her side. Carol looked even more upset as the mother babied her daughter there. “Oh, sweetie. What’s this about a fight?”

“We’re trying to get to the bottom of it, Ms. Fenny.” Their useless principal cut in. “There are some accusations being made-”

“I don't want to name him.” Carol tremored. “Unless I know you’ll make it stop right now.”

Evie realized another fact. Carol Perkins was trying to tell them something else entirely.

“Carol,” Hopper took control of the room. Slower now that everyone was here. “How about you just talk to me from the beginning?”

Evie wanted to scream and didn't. Couldn't. Mona's arm was around her. Pulling her in.

“I knew he was seeing other girls, but...” She swallowed. “The first time it happened. He just...wouldn't stop looking at me.”

“And this was?”

Her eyes flicked. Away and back.

“Over break. Last week. We spent the first night together.” She rubbed her pink nose. Sniffled. Fredrick had dinner with Evie that night. Fist clenched. Why was Carol lying? “He came to my house while my mom wasn’t home. ”

“Did he force his way in?”

“N-No. I was doing my homework. I let him in. It was just talking, you know?” Carol was staring at Evie while she spoke. Brown eyes pleading to not do this. “But, it felt different. Him staring. I noticed it. So, he kissed me.”

“Did he threaten you?”

A tear fell down Carol’s cheek.

“He told me...I wanted this.” Her jaw set. Wobbled. Felt like she was looking through Evangeline into something further away.

Behind her, Jason sat forward.

“And what happened after this?” Jim cleared his throat. "How about we go to another room and discuss it?"

She flared at him.

“No. I'm gonna talk right here... He touched me. Felt under my shirt and...he took my clothes off.” Freckled cheeks splotched with harsh tears. Makeup bled. Evie felt a shift and sat forward too. Hopper seemed to sense it and peered at her. When he read Evie's expression, he looked at Carol again.

"Carol, I think we should-"

"Say it, Chief, ask the fucking questions." Came a snap.

He set his jaw tight. Took pity.

“Did this person go after Ms. Fenny, you said?”

Mona held Evie tighter in response.

“He-” Carol unfurled. Eyes huge and not here. She was in a house. In a room. Trapped. “He asked if I wanted to see him and I said yes, but I didn’t mean it. Honest, I didn’t mean any of it. I was...I was just scared. I wanted it to all stop. I thought maybe if I did this, if I just gave in again, he’d stop hitting me...”

Hopper felt a red flag blare and scooted closer.

“Carol, how about you and I talk about this in private-?”

“You just think that you matter, you know?” She crumpled. “He wanted me to look at him so I did. He asked me how many boys have seen me and-...I felt so sick, but I mattered to somebody! I matter. I don’t try to make him so mad.”

Evie’s lips parted. Unable to look away. To stop an oncoming collision. Carol’s face blurred when her own tears fell. Still and silent down supple cheeks. This wasn’t about Evie or Fredrick at all.

Carol shook her head. Felt too many eyes burn.

“But, I knew I didn’t matter. We don’t matter, do we, Fenny? They just...they just use us. We were pretty, spring daisies and look at us now.” Carol gave this contained sob and Jim rubbed his scruff.

“Carol. Back up. You said, he hit you. If you did it, he’d stop hitting you. So, when did this really all start?”

She started to hyperventilate. Head tilting to see her stepdad across the way.

"I can make him stop, Carol." Hopper softened. "I promise."

Her shoulders hunched. Shattering.

“Couple of years ago.”

“Alright, this is over,” Jason sprang out of his chair like the life had been shocked into him. A hand wrapped around Carol’s frail elbow. “She’s coming with me. This is not-”

“Don’t touch me!” Carol shrieked and twisted away like a feral cat.

Hopper was easily taller than her stepdad so he put one hand on his belt and shoved between them.

“My daughter is coming with me!”

“You’re gonna want to calm down.” The Chief shot out, tense as Carol wiggled away and slumped to the floor to escape him. Crawling behind Hopper’s legs.

Evie hadn’t felt herself tear from her mother. Hadn’t realized she’d pushed the principal’s pointless, chatty secretary out of the way until Carol’s head connected with her shoulder. Hard enough to bruise them both. Tears and saliva wet the plaid fabric.

“Don’t let him touch me!” Carol kept chanting until Evie cradled her hair. The smaller girl clawed into the embrace. Terrified she’d be dragged away.

Evangeline wasn’t gonna let that happen.

"He won't." The transcendental instinct women had to protect each other was too powerful for that. Stronger than lightning and thunder alike.

“Carol, get over here! She’s fucking lying!” Jason fought against the Chief until he was half dragged out to the waiting officers.

“No, she isn’t...” Evie whispered. Not really paying attention any longer.

She was holding Carol so tight, they might have fused into one soul. A manicured nail snapped from digging too hard into Evie’s dress. Bled. Carol Perkins. Queen Bee of Hawkins High. Shaking and sobbing. Unleashing years of anguish she locked away and saved to channel at the only girl around who also understood it.

Sometimes people were angry because they’re not you and they wish they were.

Sometimes they’re angrier just cause you both see the world with the same eyes.

"I'm so sorry." Carol wept to no one. Mona came to them, brushing Carol's hair back.

"Come here, sweetheart, let's go with the Chief now. He'll get you taken care of." Always a mother, she helped pluck the girl up. "I got you. I got you." Carol's unsteady feet were trying to move along with her. Evie got up. Watched her mother tote another hurting girl off.

It panged. She could have screamed Fredrick's name. Damned it. Gotten Mona's affection too.

Nothing came.

Hopper paused to come to her.

"Is there anything else I should know, Evie?" He towered and she could only quiver there.

"No, sir," came the gouging lie. Eyes shifting beyond the door to the flash of distant red hair.

"Why would she bring your name into this?"

"I don't know, we just didn't like each other..." A sniffle before her tone changed. Fingers twisted the skirt of her dress around. "Your little girl. She hangs out with Max. They must feel awfully safe with you."

He blinked and tried to pick apart the syllables. Frowned because he failed.

"You're safe with me, Evie, if you have anything else you need to say," Hopper replied, rubbing his wrist as he turned.

"Just make sure she's okay. Sir."

Hopper studied her. Gave Evie's arm this idle squeeze before he stepped out.

The principal tried to offer her the tissue box so Evie smacked it from his hands. Turned her nose up and marched out.

She went home with her mother that day. Pried for details of Carol in the car.

"I don't know, baby, it's not in my hands." Mona unlocked the door. "I know her Aunt lives nearby, she might be taking her in so the poor thing can finish school..."

Evie stayed near the front door. Unmoving as Mona turned to observe her.

"What was that fight really about?" A beat. "My little girl, she doesn't get into fights. That's not you, Evie."

Is it really?

"We just didn't get along for a long time there and things...got heated." Evie paused. Maybe she didn't know who she was yet. "It won't happen again."

"You'd tell me if something more was wrong? You know you can talk to me. Right?" Mona looked desperate as she said that.

Would you really want to know about it? Evie considered. Would you tell me to think happy thoughts and focus on the good? Move forward and just forget.

Would she think her daughter was trash for her secrets?

Mona was in over her head with this. So, Evie pressed her lips. Lied too sweet.

"Yeah, mom." She swallowed rust. "Nothing's wrong."

And Mona always hoped for that answer.

"I want you to go change and lie down today. Just rest. Say a prayer for your friend."

Friend.

Evie didn't correct her on that last part. Just moved to go as Mona disappeared into the kitchen. Pausing, she turned and went in.

Hugged her mother from behind. Tight as she could.

Because she still had a mother who tried and because she could. Eyes welling as Mona patted her hand and turned to embrace her back.

“You know, I love you so much, Evangeline. You’re everything to me. You saved my life, you know that?” Mona caught herself. Didn't say what she meant. Shuddered and gathered herself. Blinking her eyes and thanking God for waterproof makeup. “Go, lie down. Take a nap. Let it all slip away, there's a new day coming.”

Evie decided sleep was the best idea.

She fell hard and didn't dream of eyes on her body. Or Fredrick.

All she saw when she closed her eyes was slow raining confetti.

** ** *

“Evie, sweetheart... Billy’s in the living room with some assignments for you. School called. No suspension. Figured they thought it inappropriate. I could wring that stupid principal's neck if I weren't a good, Christian woman. I really could.” Mona shook her daughter awake hours later. “I have dinner ready too. Crawfish etouffee. Made it the way you like.”

Evie sprang up and she wasn't sure if it was the smell of food or the pretty boy waiting for her. Either way, she slipped into the bathroom to wash up a bit. Gargled mouthwash and spat. Hurried out in a big sweater and sports bra. Curls still a delightful mess.

Billy turned upon seeing her. Eyes snapped and dipped low.

“Hey. Sorry, Billy, I was...what?”

“Ah... You’re totally not wearing pants.” He smiled, brows wiggling suggestively. Not looking away.

Evie peered down at her bare legs. Pulled the knit fabric low and blushed a thousand cherries.

“Mom!” She scrambled off and Billy got a flash of cute pink lace and black cotton. Head cocking. “Why didn’t you say anything!”

Mona just laughed from the kitchen.

“Staying for dinner, Billy?”

“You bet, Miss Mona.” He called, removing his coat. Evie put on socks and some pajama pants. Suddenly wasn’t worried about looking disheveled because Billy Hargrove had seen her orgasm barely two days prior.

Hard not to remember his fingers. Pulling her apart. Ample with flesh.

Strange. She shuffled out again to see him. Hands combing dark curls.

A breath.

“Hey.” She eased out. Stilling.

“Hi.” Billy leaned in. Quiet. Eyes sweeping carefully. “You alright?”

“I’m okay.” It felt more honest this time. “Did...Did you hear anything about...?”

“Principal’s bitch of a typist spent the rest of her shift chatting and...some stuff got around. I get the gist, not sure who else did. We go to school with a bunch of dipshits.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“Tommy was out of that place after he heard Vicki blabbing, I really thought he might tear her extensions out. She and Tina were saying some pretty horrible shit until he and Tammy chimed in. Lines are drawn, I guess.”

“That’s...awful.” Evie rubbed her arms when he offered a nod, twisting his ring around. He gestured to some papers on the coffee table.

“Steve, Heather, and I gathered whatever assignments they have out today. Not much.” Billy stepped aside from Evie. Felt her eyes on his skull. “You going in tomorrow?”

“Yeah, we’re not in further trouble. No more fights, I guess.” She rose to her toes when his head turned aside. Arms brushing his chest as she pulled them in tight. Kissed the line of his jaw and saw the earring dangle violently before his head snapped back. “Thanks for coming over. I’m gonna go help my mom.”

“Sure.” Billy rubbed the back of his head. Felt a warmth bloom in his freckles that made them glowy on honeyed skin.

A smile crossed her face there as she looked at him. Seemingly losing the next thought that dared to flutter. Stepping back to go. Not trying hard because she was reeled in. Trained easily on his expression.

And all Billy could do was meet her eyes and return the smile just as soft.

** ** *

Carol didn’t show up to school the next couple of days as Evie found her routine again. Tried to. Walking into English every day and not seeing Fredrick sitting there with his sly eyes. Those little cartoon hearts that seemed to grow and burst all blushing colors.

Felt like a frayed nerve being tugged at with little remorse. The anxiety of it lingered even still. Had Evie’s leg bobbing. She tried not to chew her pens and pencils to death.

Stories spread about Carol. Most of them incorrect about her broken home life. Kids moved on quick.

Tommy didn’t approach Evie but he stared a lot like he was considering it. She gave the popular clique space. Tried to disappear in assignments and scribbled song lyrics.

Eyes lingered outside during AP Bio once and Evie gave a start. Spine icing at a figure through the blinds standing static across the street behind a chain-link fence. Fredrick. Staring holes into her that

tore through Evie's heart. One blink. Nothing. Just empty space. Dead air.

Her chest shuddered painfully. Billy peered at Evie's tense back from his seat next to Tommy. Saw her trembling and itching to race out of class. Which she did when the bell rang.

Free period. Always meant time to go home early still. Only if Max wasn't getting a ride. Frankly, Billy didn't mind to return for her, being out of school early was too good to pass up. Evie stuffed her bag at her locker and raced between bodies squeezing her in. Escaped the side door and realized she'd forgotten how to breathe.

Fingers spread against brick so Evie could make her lungs work. Billy chased her out. Tried to touch her arm and got jerked away from.

"Hey, Evie. Slow, slow."

She bent over and hitched this sob that was utterly dry. Colorless.

"I can't stop seeing him, Billy. I don't know how to make it go away. I walk down the street and see him waiting at the end for me. I look back and he's following, it's not gonna leave. He's a disease I caught." Evie sank down into the grass that was frozen. Her face blanched. "Can't breathe."

Billy plopped next to her and put Evie's hand on his shoulder so she had something to clutch at. Something to weigh her back to earth. Careful, he dug into his bag.

"Just listen to this." He thumbed a book for a dog-eared page. "Close your eyes and just listen to me. Try to breathe with me. Feel that? Evie."

She shut her eyes tight. Wincing because Fredrick was still there in the black. Endless pools of him taking up her negative space. Her air.

Billy began to read. The smoothest tone he could. Sounding deep and melodic.

"The night has a thousand eyes, and the day but one." He read.

Perfectly level. Evie touched her forehead to his shoulder. Squeezed into him. *"Yet the light of the bright world dies with the dying sun."*

He adjusted to push the book at her.

"Okay, you read the rest. Right there. Slow."

Evie whimpered. Started to get some air back into her furious lungs. She focused on the words. Let them blur together.

"The mind h-has a thousand eyes...and the heart but one," she managed, calming down with his encouragement, *"yet the light of a whole life dies when love is done."*

She stared to reread the poem. Couple of times. Nerves bowing.

"There you go. Atta girl. Sounded great." He hushed so Evie matched him. Her brow furrowed. Sighing heavily.

"You're into poetry?" Eyes met and melted together.

"No, I can't stand it." Billy actually laughed. Crystalline eyes too pure. "Except this one. They say poetry is a good study for writing, but it's boring as shit mostly." She responded to that. Cracked a mild chuckle. He got up to brush himself off. "My ass is wet thanks to you, c'mon."

Evie groaned. Got another calm breath out so she leveled and took the offered hand. Billy loosened the grip until he felt her squeeze. Held tight and didn't worry about Fredrick's calculated steps behind her. Following always.

They made it toward the Camaro before a call rang.

"Billy! Fenny! Hey, wait up!"

Billy frowned at Tommy racing up the hill. Only because Evie snatched her hand from his. Tommy puffed to stop in front of the bumper.

"Evie. Can I talk to you?" He continued, shoulders dropping to show he wasn't here to fight.

She peered to Billy who shrugged and lit up a cigarette, got into his car then shut the door.

“Uh, yeah? Sure.”

“Listen, I...” Tommy winced at himself. “Carol mentioned you were cool about...what happened. The whole thing is my fucking fault, I let it slip to her.”

“You knew?” Evie perked and stood taller. Wanted to get upset but just couldn’t at this point.

“Yeah, I saw something and I wasn’t trying to make a mess. I was drunk and...it slipped out.” Tommy paused to meet her eyes. “And I’m sorry about just...everything. Lots of shit I can’t fix or take back. Carol, she told me things. Tried to break up with me like I’d look at her any different. Her mom was never good to her, but I didn’t know...I didn’t know. You believe me, right?”

“Y-Yeah, Tommy, I believe you. Ah, sorry...” Evie shifted awkwardly, gripping the bag over one shoulder. “How is she?”

“Her mom took the stepdad’s side. Didn’t go down well, but they’re both in some trouble. Carol is staying with her aunt. Some apartment complex near that old Brimborn steel mill. The woman isn’t half bad. Not like her sister, they don’t talk. She’s at work a lot. Day and night pretty much, but the couch pull out isn’t so bad.” Tommy hitched and gave this thoughtful squint. “Why wouldn’t Carol want to tell me this? We’ve all known each other since kindergarten. She tells me everything.”

“She was just scared.” Evie shrugged. “Lot of reasons to lie to the people we care about. Sometimes, we think we’re doing it to be kind. Sorta funny. Lying to be kind. If you see Carol, can you just...thank her for, you know, not naming him? She could have. And the whole thing, I am...I’m sorry too.”

“Sure. Yeah.” Tommy shifted back. Softer in this light. Almost hopeful. Like maybe they all had a chance. If they tried. Trying mattered. “Did the guy skip town or something? Bowers.”

“Something like that.” Evie peered at Billy blowing smoke. Filling the car up to obscure him. The red cherry of his cigarette glowing white-hot. “See you around, I guess.”

“Hey, and the whole...the dance thing. That was pretty fucked up. It *was* fucked up. These guys all act cool and shit. You get caught up in that stuff...guess it’s just so high school, huh? Doesn’t last after. I hope. Didn’t get into any college I applied to so far. Go figure. It’s all bullshit, I guess I wish I saw that earlier.” His head shook.

“They’re opening a mall around summer. Bunch of us will just work and figure shit out as we go.” Evie rolled her eyes. “Not mad about the dance. It was stupid and they’ll keep doing it. There was some good though, earlier in the evening.”

“Tannen’s crazy. I hear his dad’s still trying to buy him out of jail. Another DUI or something. He’s fucked.”

“He is.” Evie pressed her lips. Nodded so Tommy mirrored it and crossed to his car.

“See you around, Fen. Probably with Billy.” He remarked, hinting a smile.

“Yeah.” Evie scoffed at herself. Watched him go to drive off before she went to the Camaro.

“Was that an apology you got out of Tommy H?” Billy opened his door to flick the smoke out, fanning it so Evie wasn’t immersed when he started the car.

“We’re all dumb kids trying our best. For the most part.” Evie checked a mirror to fix her lipstick. “You want to hit the cafe? I’d kill for a hot chocolate. My treat.”

“You know I fucking *love* a little romancing, Evangeline. Thrill me.” Billy skidded out of the parking lot. One arm went behind her seat. Stayed there. She smiled at Billy’s profile. Felt at ease for the first time in weeks. They picked a tape and blasted it. Rolled the windows down and didn’t worry about the chill. Acted like teenagers.

Evie felt this thrill of a thousand eyes on her body. Batting delicate

lashes against silk skin. Similar to luna moth wings. Didn't fear it one bit with Billy next to her beaming too gorgeous.

A light turned red and Billy slowed to stop. Turned without ceremony to kiss Evie for as long as he could. As if he felt her gaze on him that entire time.

They had this awareness for each other. A specific ability to pick a soul out of a crowd. She hitched a sound he'd be remembering. Pushed into his mouth. Lingering unashamed to pamper each other in needed affection.

Until the cruel light turned green.

Smiles matched because there would be others to come.

Billy continued on. The kiss still on his lips. Evie found herself recalling a sea of falling metallic confetti. Thousands of eyes. A pair of blue ones that sparkled against them all. Reminding her to keep his kiss just as close.

And in this astronomical moment dancing between heartstrings, Evangeline didn't ask why.

** *** **

Saturdays. The perfect day to sleep in. Curled under miles of fuzzy blankets with a kitten snoring above your head. Daylight ignored behind blinds. Something magical about it all.

Evie got up around eleven and refreshed herself. Pulled a short sweater dress and leggings on. Ate cereal in front of the TV. Mona was off to work and Evie had the day off. Seemed like her mother pushed her further from the salon. Further from her gaze. Club didn't need her either. Frankly, the day to herself was welcomed after everything.

Noon rolled around and a doorbell trilled. Evie moaned out and dragged to peer through the hole. Heart-stopping. She yanked it open.

"Carol?"

No makeup. No helmet of red swoops. Not pristine and styled. Her hair hung in looser waves. She drowned in a chunky teal sweater and fitted sweats. Coat tossed over it with a khaki sack under one arm.

“Not dreaming, Fenny, I’m really standing here.” Carol blinked, gesturing. Tired. “You gonna invite me in? It’s cold out here. I took the bus.”

“Uh...sure...” Evie stepped back to let the girl saunter inside.

“Your house smells good.” Carol kicked some boots aside. Padded around in thick socks.

“I was burning some incense by the window. My mom stocks up in New Orleans, the good stuff. Supposed to cleanse too. I don’t burn too much with...” She played with her sleeve. “Do...you want to sit down? I was just watching Rocky Horror.”

“Sure, although, I don’t go much for boxing movies.” Carol had replied in all seriousness.

“Ah,” Evie broke to snicker, “it’s not... Um, I have other movies?”

“You have a kitten. Aw, I’m sure it’ll grow into that face,” she bent over to let Blue smell her knuckles. Evie suppressed a snort because the quip was just so *Carol*. Blue didn’t care, she only liked to be scratched by freshly manicured nails. Lavender and glittering. “Well, show me the movies. You better have a good selection. I came all this way.”

“Okay...” Evie took Carol to her room. The girl stepped in. Not worried and took over. First time in the Fenny house and she owned it.

“Horror buff.” Carol clicked her tongue. “I can work with that. Tommy’s such a baby about scary flicks. He squirms and hides and plays all tough. Still sees them with me every time. You know, we watched *The Exorcist* once and he screamed like a newborn.”

“Tommy?”

“Don’t tell him I told you that.” Carol actually smiled and picked

Carrie. Strangely appropriate.

“So...” Evie fussed with the tape and adjusted the TV. Carol went to her bag on the couch and started putting items on the table. “Why...?”

“You do a messy paint job on your nails and it bugs me.” Carol piped up, rolling a glass bottle of polish between her hands. Getting comfortable. “So, I’m going to do them right.”

Evie scoffed at her, eyes flicking up before she came to the couch.

“You’ll have all your fingers when I’m done, too. Cross my little heart.” Carol put a towel in her lap and pulled Evie’s hand over to file. “You’re not a nail biter. Thank god. I get so many at the salon. Some girls want me to work a miracle on bloody stumps.”

“You’re serious about this?”

“I’m gonna be a professional. Work my way up, maybe own my own nail salon.” Carol brought a file out. “I can already do it all. Fancy stuff. I have this book of all the nails I’ve done, including my own... Mostly my own.”

Evie fell silent. Watched the film and sighed.

“You know, every time I watch *Carrie*, I get this strange hope that it’ll end differently. That she’ll make it out of this a whole person still. And every single time, I’m let down.”

“That she’ll live and run away from that shit town. Away from her horrid mother. Maybe even with the boy. He can pretend he wasn’t into her by the end of that night.”

“Right?” Evie felt a laugh rumble her throat. Carol was intent on her nails. Meticulously working. “Carol, why are you doing my nails right now?”

“Cause you’re letting me. Can’t do Vicki or Tina’s nails, can I?” She licked her lips. “Tommy told me he talked to you.”

“Why didn’t you name Fredrick? You were going to.”

“Don't assume. I don't know, it was like...” Carol gave a sigh. “I was sitting where you were, watching myself talk.” Evie only nodded. “So, are you and Billy Hargrove a thing now?”

We're everything, Evie wanted to say. It crashed a wave up her chest. Stoplights changing colors to make time for lengthy kisses.

“I'm not sure. We just hang out.”

"Make-out?"

"...Sometimes."

“And you want to be a thing?” She had observed, head tilting. “Easier to admit it. Tommy and I have been off and on since middle school, but we keep coming back. I think I love him. I think he's gonna marry me.”

“Billy and I aren't a thing, I don't know if he does girlfriends or whatever.” Evie scrunched her face.

“I'm picking the color, by the way, it's free and you'll like it.” A smart quip that wasn't resisted. “As for Billy, just draw the line where you want with him. The guy has been following you around like a puppy since New Years, he's obviously into you...”

“You really think so?” Strange to hear it out loud from an outsider's perspective. Especially one that didn't like her.

Did Carol like her now?

“You ask too many dumb questions, Fen, you know that?” She said that too genuinely.

“I've gotten it before.” Evie shrugged. They shared a silence as Carol worked her magic. Some rose-gold tone with shimmer. Swift and clean work too from a well organized unfolding box of tools.

Evie hadn't seen Carol so intent on something she was serious about. Brow furrowed. Lips pursing thoughtfully. Something exceptionally graceful and natural about it all. Even dried them quickly like a professional.

“Well?”

“I love them,” Evie admired her fingers, “you teach yourself?”

“Watching and doing. Steady hand.” Carol packed her stuff away. “Five bucks.”

“Oh-”

“Kidding.” Carol kicked back and let Blue crawl into her lap. “Your cat likes me. I hope you're jealous.”

“She’s a sweetie,” Evie noted Carol wasn’t packing up to leave. Instead sat back on the couch like she owned that as well. Thoughts dispersed when the bell rang. Carol groaned because they were about to reach the action as Evie paused it and got the door.

“Max?” Brown eyes flickered over the shorter girl. Ginger locks piled into a high ponytail. Fatigued and dressed down in a green sweatshirt and loose leggings. Face vaguely splotchy.

“Hey. Um... Did you want to hang out today? My mom had to run all these errands and Billy left this morning to go somewhere. Neil’s home for the day, he wasn’t supposed to be, and he’s...not in a good mood.” Max rubbed a sore spot on the back of her neck. Looked away.

“Ah. Say no more, come in. Stay as long as you want.” Evie took Max by the elbow. “Have you met Carol?”

“Vicki’s friend?” Max asked.

“Ew. Not anymore. Vicki eats shit.” Carol made a face at that. “Billy’s baby sister? You hang out at the arcade.”

“Yeah.” Max sniffed and shifted awkwardly, caught the TV. “Oh, it’s almost to the best part.”

“Right.” Carol moved aside to make room. Blue still in her lap. Evie stood there for a moment in disbelief. This was her day. “You have popcorn, Fenny? Extra salt and butter.”

“I’ll make some.” Evie left them to chat. Mostly about Billy and how Neil always looked like a tightwad asshole when Carol saw him working security at the bank. Her words obviously.

Max agreed and got quiet after that. Evie returned with a steaming bowl and sat between them. Felt like she was getting pecked to death as two teenage girls nearly attacked her stealing handfuls to crunch.

They cheered when Carrie destroyed the prom in a swelter of hellfire and will. Mourned the fact that the ending was unchanged.

She dies. She always dies. She evolves and she dies. She gains a fragment of agency and she dies. She dies because she’s too powerful for her own good.

Why can’t she be saved? Was she so hopeless?

What can it mean for the rest of us?

Max picked the next flick. Another bloodbath with more flowing popcorn before they were ordering a cheesy pizza. Chattering and curling up together while the sky darkened. Movies upon movies that made it seem like the boundaries between these three girls were nonexistent.

So, no shock when Evie piped up.

“Do you guys just want to sleep over? Couch pulls out and it’ll fit us.”

And no surprise when two genuine smiles followed.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all, thank you so much as always, and please let me know what you think below or on my tumblr, Alias-B. *~*Unfortunately due to an overflow of hateful messages, I had to close my anon box this week to protect my own mental health. This was an emotional chapter to punch out but I got to sort out some feelings with what happened through Evie. I hope that resonated. You can still chat below

anonymously or use my ask with your blog//my DMs on tumblr. Thank you for all the kudos/comments. I really love each and every one, they're what keeps me going. Please leave words or chat with me if you have time.*~*

17. Heart-Shaped Shadow Box

Notes for the Chapter:

New chapter! Sorry, it's late! Took a while to edit this one. Evie's birthday bash comes with a flood of feelings and smut. Billy struggles with his heart. xoxo

Monday was strange. News spread like wildfire. Carol Perkins and Evie Fenny had a civil interaction. See it and be amazed. All's well in the animal kingdom again.

Order restored. Clouds opening. Roll on snare drum followed by velvet curtains.

Even the snow was thawing to wet slush.

It all happened at Tommy's dented locker near the English hallway's corner. Evie stopped. Hit her mark flawlessly. Found the light. Flashed a pleasant smile which earned Carol's lip twitching in response.

And the crowd went wild.

"Tommy and I are sitting with you. At lunch. Might want to warn Steve and Heather to put the claws away. We'll come bearing gifts even. Well...promises of gifts we'll deliver on later. Not school-friendly." Carol fished for a pack of mints in Tommy's pocket. This was clearly not up for debate.

"Consider it an early promise for your birthday." Tommy had added with a beam of teeth.

"Sure. Cool. See you guys." Evie held a book to her chest and continued to her locker. Switching items around before she went back to meet Billy at his. Spotted the faded leather of his jacket and ducked a little to sneak upon him.

A feline on the prowl ready to overtake the dominant male lion.

"Did you know you're the only girl around here who doesn't cover

herself in that *Love's Baby Soft* crap? The grown woman perfume gives you away, chica." Billy spoke without turning. Evie's made an annoyed sound and dropped her shoulders, inches behind him. "Not a complaint. I like the thrill of it."

Blue eyes peered to see her there and Evie got the urge to stick her tongue out as a child would. Didn't want to tempt Billy though. Or did she?

"Yeah, yeah." Air blew a curl from her face. One shoulder nestled into the locker next to him. "Feels weird today."

"You're not getting into a fight for once." He remarked, smacking metal shut to lean back against it while the student body bustled along. Eyes slipped down and Evie pouted, straightening.

"My eyes are up here, Hargrove." Two fingers rose to gesture at them.

Little extra work put into her eyeshadow and lipstick today. Little extra time picking out outfits that weren't for Fredrick. Can't go wrong with a loud print that looked like it was out of a creepy hotel's carpet. Or a short skirt with her tights. Evie felt especially positive about her body today.

She didn't eat anything bad this morning. See. She was getting better. She was stopping because she was in control and could stop this sickness at any time she wanted.

"Sure. I'll get there." Gorgeous lashes batted to knock the wind out of her, but Evie puffed. Billy's gaze lifted, flicking with amusement because she was too easy to rile up. Too easy to get blushing. "Must feel weird," he'd repeated, "no battle."

"That could be. Farewell badass reputation. I knew you all of two days." She sighed for dramatic effect and he actually smiled, head shaking before an arm swept around Evie's shoulders. Pulled her taut and flush into his fire.

For once, she didn't look at anyone else.

Leaned into Billy and walked along as if she was meant to be there.

As if they didn't look funny together.

That was a beautiful thing this morning. Something that made her feel full and in control.

"Weirded me out when Mona let me in to collect Max and you three were snoring on the pull-out."

"Sweet that you carried Max home." Evie teased. "What a good big brother you are."

"Yeah, just when I warm up, she edges off me."

"How's that?" Evie peered up at his face.

"Don't know, she hasn't been her annoying self. Growing up or whatever. Might be all her friends." Billy only shrugged. "Snappier at me. Quieter. Guess I deserve it. She stays out of dad's way, but he has an opinion on everything she does."

"She's a teenage girl. We all have our moments. I'm sure it's not easy for either of you." They turned down another hallway. Billy stiffened so she allowed him to change the subject.

"I did have good luck on my Saturday quest." He sounded genuinely triumphant. Lips turned into her curls to mutter. "Small victories."

Around them, lockers shuffled and smacked about. Chattering students moved to let them pass. Evie Fenny on the arm of his royal highness, Billy Hargrove. King. What a lucky girl she was.

If they held her echoing heart to their ears, they'd probably hear rich ocean waves. Evie wondered if Billy had reached deep within, if he'd find twinkling sea glass and opalescent shells

"Yeah, you were gone the entire day, where'd you go?" Evie had laughed and he stunned her with the flippant reply.

"Got your birthday present."

Evie came to a halt at the corner. Spinning to see him. Billy batted

his lashes again, smirking.

“What? It is the 27th, right? Wednesday?” He winced like perhaps he’d been wrong.

“How and where did you get that info? And you remembered it?”

“I have my ways, Evie.” He bit his lip. Scanned her. “Surprised I got you something?”

A blush damned her to hell.

“No, I just... A little.” Evie looked away at the trophy case. Saw them reflected and straightened up. Shuffling back. One hand rubbed at her collar. Illusions faded like dying lights. Too easily.

"Well, believe it, I'm full of surprises."

“My mom is doing something small at the salon that she thinks I don’t know about and then I’m going to Heather’s. Party on a school night. Her parents are out this week so free reign in the mansion.”

“I might have heard something about that.” Billy shrugged, peering away so she could take him in.

Freckles stunning and sparkling crystals for eyes. Endless ocean waves under a balmy sun. Evie wondered for a moment if perhaps he was oblivious to how candidly beautiful he was some days.

She inched toward him. Forgot their reflection. Forgot the students with eyes that burned. Saw Billy glanced back and froze. Caught.

“You ever think...?” Billy gave this squint to study her there. Thought he saw flecks of gold within her eyes. Sparking at him. Drawing a charge. New stars giving birth he might be able to count if he looked deeper.

“Yes...?” Evie hushed, just barely edged up on her toes. Billy never finished it. "I do."

"Do? Do what?" He flushed there. Sounding vaguely drunk. Inch back toward her.

Two magnets pining from a distance. Drawing ever nearer.

"Think. Long and hard." It came out a saccharine whisper. "I think too much in fact."

He gave this dumb, little chuckle. Unable to grasp his thoughts. Unable to share them.

"I think about things I can't control and I get so mad." Evie scoffed. Thought her eyes watered due to the intensity. "I can't stop even though there's very little I can control. It's like time and space. I can't... But, I know that, Billy, and I can't seem to stop."

Abrupt, she pushed up to her toes. Captured his lips. Just hard enough to make her point explicit. Hard enough to send him all aflutter. Bursting to pieces from every vein. A might wave crashed into them both. Swept them away. She stayed close enough to finish the thought. Made him drink it down.

"And I think you're made of that same stardust." Evie swooped around him. Left Billy dizzy as the bell rang. She didn't look back at him. Only smiled to herself and let curls bounce as she slipped off.

Billy spun on his heel to see her. Left drunk in a billow of honey amber. A smile overtaking his expression. A warm tint in his freckles.

He could have blamed her eyes with their hold. Could have blamed her hair and the way the light illuminated it just so. Hell, he could have blamed that damn perfume. The concoction of oils and lotions you'd find listed in an old witch's spell. Although, she was from New Orleans, so perhaps voodoo. He tried to rationalize it. Make it purely sexual. Make it rough and tumble.

Either way, too much became clear. Evangeline Fenny was beautiful and she was going to ruin him. And Billy was going to let her do it. Any number of heartbeats it would take, he was going to succumb. This sin he'd be begging for again and again. This lovely sin that filled his soul until it burst.

A red hot ribbon would noose his heart and twist out to Evie's own. They could sink and float and be just fine. The thought of being

tethered to something tangible didn't have to feel like a cage and muzzle. It could be freeing too. Sprinkled in their signature stardust that gave it an ethereal filter. An iridescent shimmer.

Even if it terrified him to the core.

** ** *

Evie didn't need to prep Steve and Heather for Carol and Tommy's impending infiltration of their lunch table. More news in the animal kingdom.

Princess Heather and Duchess Carol caught whispering at Heather's locker between second and third.

Truly fascinating. Pan in close for a better look.

Evie passed them and could only blink. Almost running into Robin on her way to Yearbook.

Heather and Carol standing close to each other as if they hadn't been in a nasty fight the week before. Giggling and hushing tones. Carol traded a bobby pin from her hair for an elastic Heather had tucked into a coin purse shaped like a pair of cherries.

That was a serious transaction in girl world.

Carol tugged playfully at Heather's tee, hand poised to her lips to whisper before the other girl was nodding. Evie had a thousand questions but decided not to bother. Red hair swept to flick as Carol turned to go. Following Evie because they were in Yearbook together with Nancy and Jonathan.

Usually, they sat across the room in opposite corners. Today, they shared a table.

"Heard the bio classes moved the dissections this year up to March." Carol made a face and sorted through science club photos. Seated across from Evie to work on some new pages.

"I always skip school those days and do some make-up work later. I'll take the grade hit." Evie grimaced.

"I just partner with Tommy, make him do it, and he'll get us a solid C plus." A shrug. Their teacher flicked on some hippy music they liked to pass the time. Lazy class. "Do a bunch of shots after."

"Yeah, I can't even handle being in the room." Evie stacked some finished sections aside. "How are things between you and Tommy?"

Carol peered up briefly between making little notes. Blew a pink bubble and popped it.

"He's still my number one slice. I don't know, I thought he'd get weird about the whole thing. Kinda shocked me." She mused, shifting pictures about. "I did say he's gonna marry me one day. Pretty sure. I mean we're plenty stupid and we fight. But, we're allowed."

"Good, that's...good." Evie felt eyes blaring holes. Stared at the page she was reworking.

"Feels like you got another question in there, Fen."

"I don't know." Shoulders hitched higher. Evie tucked some curls back and smacked her mauve lips.

They sat in silence under dim fluorescent lights for a few minutes. Carol paused to apply a fresh layer of gloss in her tiny compact. Flashed the mirror at Evie's eyes to bug her.

"Hey." One hand swatted aimlessly when she was blinded. Carol snickered, slapping the mirror shut.

"You're really into him aren't you?" A head tilt. "Billy."

"Things...shifted after the dance. He asked me out. Then, I asked him out. We sorta went out together. Nothing official. I don't know what's a date and what isn't with him. I don't. As I said, I don't think he does girlfriends. I don't think I'd make a very good girlfriend either."

"Not with that attitude." A scoff. "Have you asked?"

"...No."

“You’re overcomplicating it because you have major, *major* trust issues, Evie.” Carol deduced easily. Too easily. Evie sat back. Opened her mouth to protest and shut it. “Billy might have issues too. But, if a guy screws up and spends two months following you around trying to make it right. Not really sleeping around. Obviously it’s crossed his mind. Just quit dragging and ask him. You might like the answer.”

“I don’t know, sometimes I think it’s supposed to be like a fairy tale. Without all the...ugh.” Evie cringed at herself. Nails tapping the rhythm of a new song she was working on at home.

“Make the fairy tale happen. Be like Cinder-fucking-ella. *Cinder-Evie*.” Carol leaned in to roll her eyes. “Evie Fenny wants romance in Hawkins. Some of us can’t even get cable, you know.”

Evie snorted. Peered up so both of them laughed. Tension fluttered.

“Just slam him into a wall and ask. Billy will respond to that.” A wink before she got sultry. “Lick his balls or something. He’ll probably get the hint. Boys aren’t complicated.”

“Oh, god.” Evie was still giggling silently. Tried to keep it down under the music playing as students went to go develop some photos. Nancy and Jonathan saw the two and couldn’t help whispering. Odd sight. “I kinda have already.”

“No, shit?” Carol bit her lip. “Evangeline, you absolute *harlot*.”

“I mean,” Evie blushed, “we’ve done stuff. Just not gone all the way.”

“Look at you. Ugh, I know he’s good in the sack. I just do. Tommy and I even talked about it cause we’re like that. We hinted inviting him in once at a party and he was too busy mooning over you at that time.” Carol fiddled with a purple gel pen. Played coy. Tongue in cheek. “Tommy’s not bad, we get a lot of practice in though.”

“Billy...he puts cologne or something...down there. Makes the taste weird.”

“Uh.” Carol groaned. “You know, I bet Tommy picked up that trick from him cause he started doing it after Billy rolled in. I fucking

knew that Cali boy would be a bad influence.” A sly look followed. “Evie Fenny is getting it. And she could be *actually* getting it if she weren’t a damn coward.”

"I am." Evie covered her face.

"Just..." Carol shrugged and tugged one of Evie's hands down by the wrist. Voice low. "Just think about how good it'll be when he's undressing you. Kissing your neck. And those hands. The thing he might whisper in your ear... Look at you blush."

She released Evie with a light laugh, continuing.

"Don't make it rocket science. Ask him. Get the orgasm you deserve, Evie. That's my motto."

“Not terrible... We get heated and during times I’m actually about to tear his clothes off, we keep getting interrupted. It’s like some evil force is against us. I don't know, I still get weird when he touches my body and I'm trying to stop.”

Carol only flashed her teeth.

“Maybe your luck will improve. Burn some more incense.”

Evie only hummed in response. They mulled over pages again. Traded images to find the perfect shots.

“Gonna ask you something, you don’t have to answer because it’s stupid.” Carol’s voice dimmed. Eyes unable to raise for the first time as she tapped her nail. “Do you, like, miss him at all? You know who.”

Evie blinked at her.

“That’s not stupid... Ah, sometimes. I don’t think it’s exactly him I miss. Maybe just the good times we did have. Talking. Feeling important and indispensable to someone. The times he held me or gave me things or included me in his life as if I could actually fit. Maybe it was wrong and fake, but he saw something in me and he wanted that to love him back. I’ll bet it did if anything.”

"Oh." Was all Carol said, nodding. "Did he put those bruises on you last week? Tommy saw you."

"Yeah," Evie cleared her throat, "and Billy found out. He'd picked up some stuff beforehand. I tried to end it and Fredrick didn't want to and then he got scared. Tried to scare me which got violent. But, Billy, ah...beat the shit out of him."

"I think Tommy would have done the same...if he had a chance. He talked about it. Jumped right into macho man talk when I...when I told him. Looked like he might cry when I told him how long it really went on. He believed me and my own mother didn't." Carol exhaled a sharper breath.

"She didn't want to hold the blame," Evie piped up. As if she knew the horrible truth of motherhood and life and what colors should never go together. How some women weren't meant to be mothers and some women weren't meant to be daughters either. "Some mothers...they can't handle the fact that maybe they brought the monsters home. They were blind. Not all of them manifest under our beds, they get put there by people we trust."

"Miss Mona have bad boy luck?"

Evie peered aside.

"You could say that." She paused and had this brief moment of repetition and ferocity. Repeat something. Believe it. Harder each time. "My father though, he loves me. More than anything. He'd be here right now if he could. He would. I made him so happy." This almost manic smile tugged her lips desperately. Carol saw a flash that resonated, but Evie snuffed it. "I bet Tommy is doing what he can to support you, even if he's a little lost about it."

"These boys. Acting like they can chase all our demons away or something. Scared when we try to do the same for them."

"Right. Our demons aren't remotely tackled, they're mildly concussed." Evie agreed. Softer eyes lifting again to meet Carol's across the way. "I guess trying is what matters most though."

They both seemed to accept that gentle sentiment.

** ** *

Mona Fenny was terrible with surprises. Always giddy and singing along to music to drown that out. Bopping against the wheel as she drove Evie into the salon. Parked around back, smiling bright.

“You go on first, baby. I gotta get some bags out of the truck.”

“Oh, boy.” Evie pushed out. Mona plucked her from school early that Wednesday. Made her gussy up a little extra. Red sweater dress with a black belt. Gold glitter over her smoked eyes. Red lip to match. Pretty patterned lace tights and boots. Green bomber pulled close, she trudged inside. Through the backroom and out into darkness.

Lights flicked to blind her. Spots dancing.

“Surprise!” A chorus of sing songs. Music picked up. Dolly Parton of course.

Evie plastered a smile and gawked as if she hadn’t expected it. All the salon ladies. Heather. Susan and Max. Claudia offering a cake decorated with pink and periwinkle buttercream flowers. Candles dancing.

Evie closed her eyes and made a wish she held close to her heart before blowing them all out in one go. This one would come true.

“Thank you, ladies.” Evie peered around at the salon decorated in gold streamers.

“Lets get some cake passed around now. I’m sure these girls have some excitement planned.” Mona clapped her hands and ladies dispersed. “We’ll do gifts and our dinner this weekend. You’re eighteen and you don’t want to spend the night at your mother’s salon.”

She kissed Evie’s cheek and licked her thumb to wipe the pink print aside.

"Thank you, mom," Evie felt something heavy in her gut, "I love you." Mona was trying so hard to make this nice for her. One day. Then she'd disappear back into her slinky dresses. Into her work. Into those adult parties. Into another man's arms. Away from Evie and whatever glimmer in her daughter's soul was so frightening.

"I love you. Go sit. We'll bring the cake over."

Evie crossed to Heather.

"You pack a bag? We'll take you to school tomorrow." She bounced in a seat when Evie nodded. "Sure you don't want to do anything else tonight? We could see a movie."

"Nah, a bonfire. Roasting marshmallows. Chinese take out and wine. I just wanna hang out with my friends. Plus, it's a school night."

"Ah, let loose a little. For your birthday." Heather shrugged as slices of cake were sorted around. Max sat alone in the corner, picking at her piece when Susan left to go to Mona and chat.

"One sec, Heath," Evie went to Max and sat down. Slow as if she'd scare the younger girl off. "Hey."

"Hi. Uh, thanks for having us. My mom keeps telling Mona you guys have made us feel welcome here and all." She pulled the sleeves of her grey hoodie lower. "She gave Mona some gifts for you to unwrap later. I hope you like them."

"Yeah? I'm sure I will. We like you. Can't wait to open those also." Evie scanned her. "I had fun, you know, at the sleepover. We should have more."

"You don't think I'm a dumb little girl?" Max peered up. Finally took a bite. Odd to see a growing teenage girl so disinterested in a heavily frosted cake.

"No, you're smarter than most of the kids at school." Evie wondered briefly who could have put that thought in her head and made it stick. Didn't take long to figure out who. Mad Max was being slowly worn down.

And she was so small here. So fragile and thin. Evie couldn't help picturing a shadow looming over Max's red hair. The tiny amount of force it'd take to knock her off her feet. Neil in a drunken stupor gunning slowly for the other fresh target in his house.

"You can come over any time. I have a lot of movies and Blue likes the attention. She's a needy little thing."

Max pressed her lips. Gave this small half-smile.

"Thank you. I'd like to hang out more. I'm only friends with one girl around here and she's being homeschooled until next year."

"Can I hug you, just as a thank you for being one of the coolest girls I know?"

Surprise etched.

"Okay." Max practically threw herself into Evie's arms the moment they set the cake aside. Thin fingers bunched up the fabric of Evie's dress so she cupped the back of Max's head and held her.

"It'd be cool to have you as a sister. We could team up on Billy. My skateboard and your roller skates. I saw a pair hung up in your room."

"I mean, we could still do that now." Evie laughed. Tipped Max's chin up. "You're gonna be okay."

It seemed to resonate. Heather joined them as they ate their fill of cake. Evie unwrapped a couple small gifts. Jewelry and craft supplies. Fabrics she'd wanted and makeup.

Heather whisked her away to Loch Nora after some farewells. They practically bounced into the big house. Ordered a ton of food before they got the fancy fire pit out back started so it'd be ready later.

The doorbell rang.

"Steve!" Evie perked after answering. Let him squeeze her in a hug. Practically plucked her from the floor which earned a surprised giggle.

“Got you something, it’s small.” He smiled sheepishly and offered a little box. “You’re a tough girl to buy jewelry for even if you wear a bunch. You know that, Eves?”

“No, I’ll wear just about anything.” Playing coy, Evie gave an endearing sway.

“You hardly take the music note necklace off and I’ll never find earrings better than the ones you make.” He swept a hand through gorgeously styled locks. Cracked a pleased grin. “I notice things.”

“Ah. Fair.” Evie poked his chest. Heather waved when she came in from the back. “My dad got me this necklace from one of his trips. Sometimes, I’ll change it or wear something with it.” She touched the gold chain.

“I found this at a fancy vintage joint,” Steve explained as she opened it. An ornate brooch. Stunning sun and moon. Soft expressions attached with two looping chains. Decorated in shimmering opals.

Evie stared at it. Had this panicked thought about the one Fredrick gave her. The glittering ladybug.

The one she swallowed that had not come out yet.

“Do you like it?” Steve broke into her thoughts. Evie blinked and shook her head to smile.

“It’s beautiful, thank you. I’ll pin it on my coat now.” Evie kissed his cheek and bounded off. Left Steve there to blush a sweet, dewy pink.

More doorbells. Clicking incessantly until Steve groaned and opened it. Billy followed by Tommy and Carol coming up the path from another car.

“Password?” Steve played his bratty self.

Billy cocked his head and charged in to put Steve in a headlock. Messed his hair up while he got slapped at as Tommy cackled on the way in.

"Jesus, Holloway, I forgot about your digs here. Bigger than Harrington's place. No offense." He waltzed by with Carol on his arm. Left Steve and Billy to wrestle.

"Hey, boys! Not on her birthday." Heather got between them. "I agreed to this very strange joining of two groups out of love and friendship. We're all cutting the shit now."

"He started it." Steve shoved off and reached to ruffle Billy's curls. Got a hard swat for it. "We're still burying the hatchet." Beating up creepy teachers brings boys together, he figured.

Evie liked all of them, that was good enough for Heather.

"Dick." Billy jabbed back.

Tommy peered back at Steve. Old times. New surroundings. New mindset. The other boy shrugged at him, lighthearted.

Evie poked her head around the corner. Blinked in surprise.

"Hey, all... No wonder Heath ordered the entire menu."

"We come in peace, Fen." Carol removed her coat and Tommy presented a couple of bags.

"Also, we brought the wine and weed. As promised at that first lunch."

"I just said to get wine...but, I won't complain. We can only smoke it outside. The smell will linger and my dad won't like it." Heather winked, coming to take the items. "Thank you, guys. We have food coming. Movies. S'mores for the fire pit."

"Look who's trying to behave on her eighteenth." Carol winked. She shared this look with Heather that Evie didn't notice. Billy stared at her. Watched nervous hands smooth out her dress. "Hargrove, didn't you bring the lucky lady a gift? Be a gentleman and present it."

"Left it in the car." He cocked his head, signaling for Evie to fall in stride next to him. Without her coat, she clasped her hands behind her back and followed him back outside. Down the stone steps.

"Still weird?" Tommy came to Steve, hands in his back pockets.

"Honestly, yeah." He nodded as Carol went after Heather out back. Both of them plotting.

"Does suck about the princess. We know you liked her and all."

"Ah, she's happier with Byers. Things happen. Guess it's part of growing up."

"How about we drink a bunch tonight and start some shit over?" Tommy clapped Steve's arm, earning a cracked smile.

"I'd like that."

Outside, Billy and Evie crossed to his Camaro.

"Glad you guys came. Might be boring, I said nothing too exciting." She puffed cold air. Billy opened his trunk and fished for something wrapped in newspaper.

"We...didn't have fancy wrap so I used the Sunday cartoons. Only part of the paper I can get my dad to let go." He winced, handing it to her.

"No, I love the funnies." Teeth etched at her lip. Evie met his eyes to open it.

"It's a little fragile." He warned. Evie peeled the paper away and blinked a couple times.

A thin shadow box with a tarnished black frame. Inside pinned was a luna moth. Dainty specimen all glowy in moonlight.

"Whoa. How-?"

"I found it in this old antique shop up in the city. Hidden way in the back. They had a bunch of them, different bugs. I don't know, it made me think of you." He explained. Too delicate like he might shatter. Evie ran her fingers along the frame. An object of wonder and curiosity. "Kinda strange and pretty...and you're damn strange and pretty."

She gave this breathless snort. Snapped out of it. Looked up at Billy's eyes with this vulnerable sort of expression crossing.

"I really love it. Thank you." Evie took his chin and kissed him. Felt that same sensation whirl that made them both dizzy.

Billy pushed his forehead into hers. Brushed their noses and dropped aside. Let his head rest on her shoulder. She smelt the blond hair and felt it tickle her neck. One breath hitched.

"Let's get back. I'll put this in my bag so I can hang it up at home."

Evie held it close as they walked along. Not looking at each other or touching. They wouldn't be able to handle it. She figured this gift is what her heart had always looked like. A deep, dark shadow box with a pretty moth fluttering inside behind glass. Waiting to be seen and admired. Waiting to flit out and feel the wind and sun.

Going inside, she wondered if Billy had known that. If he placed their stars just so because he knew how they fit together.

Tension sprang through laughter over take-out boxes. Trading and gorging on food while a horror flick played before them. *The Funhouse*. Seated on the floor around the coffee table against the sofas and chairs. Odd gathering of souls.

Tommy was a squirmer. Kept hiding in Carol's shoulder. Steve felt himself looking around. He had his friends back and more. This could be nice again. He hadn't been social since everything fell apart with Nancy. Befriending Heather and Evie was a good start.

Billy's leg bumped Evie's and she gave this blush like someone caught them being obscene. Settled into him for the last half of the movie when they were full and the night rose outside. Billy felt a spark as Evie hid in his chest at a jump scare. Chuckled to himself to play it off.

Evie Fenny watched horror movies for a living, she just needed a reason to play dumb and get close to him. But, she wasn't gonna admit that. Being tucked under his bicep was too good.

"Psst, hey." Evie said in his ear. Billy slid his eyes to see the TV

light play on her expression.

On the expensive screen, a rat-like vampire snarled. Mutated and warped with saliva on his fangs.

“Hm?”

“That’s you.” She hitched a squeal when he pinched her side. Pulled in closer by his arm.

Carol and Heather were still shooting each other looks. Mugs of cheap red wine got passed around. Bloomed cherries in everyone’s cheeks and mouths.

They gathered around the fire outside. Roasted marshmallows and lit up joints. Heather’s family had a fancy pit built into the ground and a stone seating circling it. With most of the snow gone, they all bundled up. Carol draped into Tommy as they shared a smoke.

“Steve, eat this one. I made it special.” Evie flashed a crooked, devious smile. “For you.”

“I don’t trust you.” He laughed, opening his mouth before she stuffed it in. Marshmallow fluff covered his lips until they cackled. Steve pushed a fresh one back at her that melted chocolate over her mouth. Evie giggled and caught Billy staring as she licked her lips. Wanting to lap it up himself.

“Did I get it all?” Evie faced him, breaking the moment. Billy reached up with his thumb and swept it under her bottom lip. Saw her tongue shift like it might jet out before he pulled away and licked the pad.

“Now, you did,” he winked.

At that point, Tommy and Steve caught on to Heather and Carol’s little knowing looks. Took some eye-fucking to get there but they made it.

Heather was pleasantly blazed. Leaning back with her feet up on the stone. Sighing. Evie puffed and passed a smoke back to her. Started to blow out before Billy angled her face at him. Inhaled some

of the pot to enjoy it.

"Tommy, who supplies your shit?" He hummed.

"Hill Valley, they supply all the locals. Stoner who gave it to me swore it made you fucking time travel, I think he was right."

"Go back in time and stop this asshole from beating my keg record." Steve snatched the joint next, gesturing to Billy. Only got a rough laugh in response.

"So, we're all fucked. But, I have rooms. Lots and lots of guest rooms." Heather mused. "I'm so rich and popular, guys."

"We had no idea." Carol faked a gasp. "Prissy drunk."

"This is so weird." Evie rubbed her cheek, lulled into Steve so he put the smoke between her lips with two fingers. Let her inhale it before she puffed out. "All of us, I mean. It's weird. Life sucks and we're just like...friends now."

"It's like we wasted all that time on stupid shit when we could have been doing this." Carol decided with red eyes. Everyone nodded in response.

Evie fell the other way and put her head on Billy's shoulder. Slowing, they stared at the flickering fire. Smoke rising to purge whatever was here before.

"We still gonna share a lunch table after this? Acknowledge each other?" It was Steve who spoke up.

"Nowhere else to go." Billy reached out to take the joint from him and finish it. That was agreed upon too. Wasn't the worst sentiment at this hour.

They came down from the wine and pot. Simmered. Put the fire out and trailed back into the house. Watched half of another movie before they started to split off.

Steve passed out on the biggest couch so Evie covered him in a blanket. Stopped Billy and Tommy from drawing on his poor, sweet

face. Gave him a kiss on the temple for good measure.

"Think it's time. Midnight. Happy Birthday, Evie." Heather mashed her into a tight hug. They all left Steve to snore and wandered upstairs. Changed and washed up.

Billy disappeared down the hall to one of the bathrooms. Evie emerged a bit later from Heather's room rubbing her nose.

"Tommy and Carol can use this room." Heather was in the hallway gesturing. "Steve's on the couch. Hey, Eve, you want to use the third floor? Sheets are fresh. The birthday girl should get the best and biggest guest room. Right, Carol?"

"I couldn't agree more, Heather. We left you something special on the bed. It was too *big* to wrap."

Snickering followed.

"Sure...sure..." Evie ruffled her hair out, not listening. "Night."

"Enjoy your present," Carol gave this little sing-song. Arms crossing as she watched Evie climb the steps. Waited until she was gone to plant a slick high-five on Heather. "Idiots."

"Totally." Heather went off to bed.

Evie pushed the door open and jumped a mile at the same time Billy spun, dropping his shirt.

"Oh, sorry, they said..." It dawned that Evie had just been tricked. "They told you to sleep here?"

"Yeah, Heather said...oh." He clicked his tongue and smiled, head shaking because he had to look away. It was all too good.

Evie pressed the door shut and planted herself against it. Locked it idly. The snap sparked Billy to attention.

"I'll be having a little chat with them about this. It's...um..." She scanned him in his jeans. Saw muscles twitching under flesh. Wet her lips.

"Yeah, I'll be getting down on my knees to fucking thank her." He marched over. Kissed Evie hard against the doorway then brought her flush into his frame. Hands trailing down the curve of her back.

She hitched a gasp and got one arm around his neck. Felt about to turn the lights down. Moonlight spilled in. Full and bright.

Billy's hands were under her shirt. Bunching it up. Palming her bottom. Tracing the lace edge of her underwear to playfully snap it. They stumbled around toward the bed. Evie on her toes pulled him down for more kisses. Felt like no amount would be enough.

"Not a motel, but I think we can make this work." Billy got pushed into the plush covers. Sat up to let Evie climb into his lap. They looked at each other. Stilling.

"Is this okay?" She mumbled and he only nodded.

Breathing deep until hearts pounded in perfect sync. Evie cupped his face. Opened her lips against his until Billy gave this visceral moan.

Fingers slipped under the tee again. Squeezed her breasts. Hurried the fabric up so he could taste her skin. Evie shuddered and tipped her head back. Grinding into him. Pulling his hair because he was ruining her already.

Because Billy Hargrove was about to be her beginning and end.

Because she was fine with that.

"Evie..." Billy groaned. Fingers pushing into her flesh. He sucked little flower petals into her chest. Tongued her nipples to hard, rosy buds. Evie felt one hand wander down into her panties. Cried out at the two digits that slipped against her experimentally. "Yeah?"

"Y-Yes. Like that. You feel so good, Billy." She attacked his neck. Kissing and nipping until his legs shook. She would ruin him just as well and he'd already tried to make peace with it.

Billy brought his fingers up to suckle them. Shifted to wet her nipple and lick the arousal off. Two strong hands, turned them to

throw her into the mattress. *God, his muscles.* Evie felt him crawl up her body. Hovering to just look at her with spun gold spilling around his neck and crown.

Felt more intimate than anything they'd done. Just looking. Taking a body and soul in.

Billy started pulling her shirt off. Going for her panties to toss the flimsy fabric aside. No resistance followed. She wanted him to look. Wanted to be seen. Maybe it shouldn't have felt so incredible.

Eyes watched her surrender there bathed in the moon. Evie rubbed her thighs together. Covered her breasts with her arms. Billy's chest heaved. Mouth sweeping down to kiss her until the resolve melted. He pinned her wrists playfully and kissed down her neck, stopping to inhale that perfume.

"You're pretty." Lips nudged her insecurities up and away. "So pretty."

Billy brushed dark curls from her shoulders and cheeks. Began to peck soft kisses everywhere he could. Mapping her face out. Every so often she found his lips to steal one back. A soft breath grazed her ear.

"Lemme see you, too." Evie got a hand free and cupped him boldly. Billy jolted into her palm. Moaned. Beautiful beyond words. He let her push his pants down and stroke him. Gazes melted together and he stopped her only to toss his jeans aside, up on his knees to breathe even.

Evie pushed up only to marvel at him. Reluctant hands lifted. Smoothing down the hard contour of his chest. The line of those hips. She wanted to map him out as well.

"You're beautiful." She brushed her mouth against his hip. A true Eros.

Billy combed his fingers into Evie's hair, tilting her face up so he could curve over for a lengthy kiss. Moaning when she praised him. Wordless with her simple touch. Explored all the exposed honey skin.

Counting little freckles. Billy nuzzled his nose into Evie's, pressed their heads together, and breathed her in. All of her.

"Gonna eat you out." He nipped down her chest, pushing her back into the bed. Evie tensed on instinct but nodded. Wanting it. Saw those lashes flutter before he buried his mouth into her mound.

She cried out into her palm. Spine arching so his taut arms wound under soft thighs. Held her hips to adjust. Spread her open for his tongue. Devoured her shamelessly. Pornographically.

Billy liked to make noise. Like to force it out of her too. He flicked his tongue inside. Lapped up toward her bundle to tease and cradle it. Slight stubble made red swatches on her tender skin.

What did she like? What made her pray for mercy?

It left Evie to twist around. Hands grasped for the sheets. She gave him her voice willingly. Gave him every beat and sigh and pulse. Billy made this obscene suckle against her. Crawled up with slick lips so Evie pulled him into her frame. Kissed those pink lips. Licked into his mouth. Tugged at gold locks and ran her hands along his back.

Billy was nudging between her legs before Evie shifted so they were on their sides. Shocked him with a murmur.

"I want to be on top first."

"What?" He actually laughed lightly. Pecked her mouth. "No, no, sweetheart. I'm on top."

"I called it first and I'm the birthday girl." Evie pouted. Pushing him on his back playfully. Billy came up on his elbows. Brow furrowed.

"You're serious. But..." He sounded breathless when her hand smoothed down to stroke him. Persuading. "But, I'm the man. It's our first time. The man's supposed to be on top the first time."

"Says who? You're so cute when you say dumb things, Billy." Evie taunted, kissing his cheek. "There's no rule. Maybe I wanna be *the man*...if you really wanna put it that way. You'll get a turn. Maybe.

You might convince me.”

He smiled when she winked at him. Evie kept up her persuasion. Swung her leg over his hips. Kissed up his neck because she knew it would make him into putty. Billy could only shudder.

Evie let her weight rest against his frame. Snuffed out every voice that told her she couldn't be desired and sexy. Billy moaned at the feel of her too. All of her. Grasped fleshy hips and ran his hands up sloping curves. Evie pressed into his chest, curls spilled over her shoulders.

“I might really die if I don't feel you soon.” Billy just marveled up at her. Cupped her breasts until Evie sighed into his touch. A blush spread over her cheeks. She captured his mouth in response.

Eyes met and she gave this little nod so he followed it. Muscles tensing.

“I want to feel you, too.” Evie licked her lips so they adjusted a bit together. She came up and gave him a few slow pumps. “Do you *really* wanna feel me, Billy?” His shaft pressed flush into her folds. Hips rocked slow. Torturing.

Looking clouded, he nodded and tried to find some words.

“Fucking, please. Evie.” He tilted his head back. Chest heaving. “You, uh, took your pill?”

“Like clockwork.” Evie shuddered. “I want this. You.”

Billy looked down and gave her thigh an encouraging squeeze, biting his lip as she positioned him. Starting to sink down. They both cursed aloud. Went tight after a shared quake. Evie mounted him. Let him fill her all the way up with her hands flat against his chest.

“That’s it. Fucking perfect.” He was muttering while she whimpered quietly. Massaging her hips so she’d relax. “You don’t have to move yet. Feel so fucking good. Look at me, Evie.”

She did. Darkening eyes peeking through a curtain of curls he moved aside.

"I got you, Angel. I got you." Billy lifted for a kiss. Bucked slightly inside her so she gave this experimental rock into him. Mouths brushed together and he whispered. "Fuck me."

He begged that. Begged for her. Only her. Evie pressed him back down. Tilted her head aside at the feel of him pulsing. Started to move with some fervor.

Fingers squeezed her hips. Left marks guiding her into his thrusts. Both of them sinking fast.

"*Mm*, Billy." Evie arched there against the moon and stars. Let them fill the room with her voice. She hitched a cry when he gave her ass a playful swat. Urged her to go faster. Billy wiggled and came up a bit. Pulled Evie all the way down and drank her moan into his lips.

He held her there, biceps flexing when his hands went around her back so he sat up fully. Teeth nipped at her chest and he undulated up inside her. Took some control back.

"H-Hey..." Evie was slipping fast. Mouth parting while she clung to his shoulders. "I'm the man."

"It's your birthday," Billy mumbled into her throat. "Little worship is what a pretty girl deserves on her birthday. Don't you think so?"

Fingers pushed between her spread legs. Worked her until a cry muffled into the crook of his neck. Evie curved into him. Clung. Rode him harder.

"So good." Billy managed again. "Pretty, pretty, pretty." He pulled her hair. Exposed that creamy throat to his mouth once more. Tormented her until Evie's resolve melted so he could flip them over. Another cry echoed. Hips pushing with force deep into her. She gripped his shoulders, legs curling around his hips.

"Billy, please..." Evie mewled under him. "More." She tucked some blond hair aside sweetly. Both of them slicked and wanting. Connected utterly.

Billy was so ample with her body, chasing her fears away with his hot touch and lovely kisses. He hovered over Evie. Pulled out and

looked down to where their bodies met. Loved the sight of himself disappearing inside. One hand brought her thigh higher for a better look.

"Flexible girl. I'll keep that in mind."

Evie fluttered around him. Reached down and touched their mixed arousal. Played with herself while he watched and started to find his pace. She licked her digits of their slick. Let him have a taste after. Billy laced their fingers and came down to watch her eyes.

Panting. He really began to pound into her until the bed was rocking with them. A filthy sound of skin slapping together with each thrust joined their gasps. He didn't care if this whole damn neighborhood could hear them.

"Love the way you squeeze me." Billy's thumb was back against her. Tormenting perfect little circles that had her whining. Evie had this out of body moment like she was watching herself writhe on the bed. Billy Hargrove fucking her stupid. Praising her. Touching her. Uttering nasty things about how she was all his now and he could spend forever making her feel so good. "Gonna come inside this sweet, little pussy after I make you quake. You wanna come for me, Evie? That's my fucking girl."

"Oh, fuck...fuck, I can't stand you." She tightened around him. Eyes rolling back. Relishing his touch so he sped up. "I'm right fucking there, Billy, don't stop. Stay with me. Stay..." She cupped his face. Found those drunken lips.

"Don't have to stand, I," he shuddered, "I got a perfectly good face you'll be sitting on later."

Cheeky little shit.

Evie actually laughed. Thrilled. Pulled him all the way against her body, arms under his and around his taut back. Billy stopped all the dirty talk to whimper.

She felt so good. He didn't know it could feel this good.

"I'm yours, Billy," Evie decided at last with a flutter of glowing

moths escaping the heart-shaped shadow box carved into her chest. Happy. She so wanted to be his. Mouth against the shell of his ear. "All yours." Her thighs shuddered and he felt her entire body lock. A graceful arch went through it. "I'm c-coming." Evie managed so he stroked harder. Made her gush around his cock with the sweetest sound he'd ever heard. Kept thrusting to draw it out as she squeezed him too tight. Chanting cries of curses mingling with his name. All sin.

All his.

Billy couldn't even warn her. He held out as long as he could and began to fuck release inside her. Both of them wrapping tighter around each other. Still trying to rock through it like they were lying on a warm beach being caressed by sweet ocean waves. Evie sagged, out of breath as he collapsed against her body. Still rutting like an animal to finish himself.

Gasping, Billy came up to pull out. Watched his own release sink out of her. So fucking hot, he couldn't help pushing it back in. Evie tensed. Overstimulated when he pressed dainty kisses to her tummy and chest.

Blue eyes came up to meet her brown ones and something broke. Shattered. Flooded out. They both locked in to feel it. Billy looked at her and the sensation consumed him utterly. Betrayed him. He stared and couldn't look away. Frozen. Ruined. Evie blinked up at him. Spread open and hair splayed. Reached up to caress his jaw with her brow furrowing.

"Billy, you're shaking." She swallowed to catch her breath. Eyes searching him. She tipped his head forward to kiss his warm temple. Lingered with sweet promises. Both of them on fire and slicked in glowy dew. "I got you."

He still trembled so hard. Unable to stop. Let Evie bring his head to her collar so she could pepper more kisses into his hair and comfort him.

Billy stared out at nothing. Floated in this sort of subspace while Evie brought him back down to touch the Earth. Gentle as she could.

They held each other there. Evie still kissing him. Petting him delicately and humming in his ear. Idly, he let his fingers whirl into her curls.

"Are you alright? Billy?" She tried again. Massaging his shoulders while he listened to her beating heart. Something wet splashed against her neck as he shuddered. Sniffing once.

"I just..." He came up. Let awareness flit back. Got near silent. *I think I'm happy.* "I'm fine." The feeling spread a cold under his bones. "You?"

Billy cupped her head for a lazy kiss. She smiled up at him.

"I'm okay. Better than okay." She soothed again. "I got you." Naked, they wound around each other. Got under the covers and laid twisted together.

"Evie." Billy choked on air. Chest sinking. He had to let one truth out. Just one, he owed her that much. And it ached. "Gotta tell you something."

"Yeah?" She sunk into his chest. Held. Evie braced like it might hurt her too.

"You know you're... You're the best thing about this place." Billy squeezed his eyes shut. Let her hold him tighter in response. Let Evie give up some of her warmth to him because he needed it and she just liked to see him happy and safe.

"I didn't know it could feel like that." She began, fingers making shapes into his chest. Evie opened her heart. Let him admire it. "Billy, I want to be more with you. Like...Like a girlfriend. This sounds silly. You don't have to say anything. I just...I don't want to run from you because you make me happy. I think I might make you happy too. We're... You were right about a lot. The stars and all. Despite everything, I think we were supposed to find each other and it feels good. I want to be yours-"

Billy tilted Evie's chin up. Hushed the truths with his lips. Nuzzled her so she'd relax back into him. He couldn't reply. The syllables

wrapped around his throat and choked him. And Evie trusted him. So, she didn't ask for them. That made it ache more.

Placing her head upon his chest when they shifted again. Billy went very still. Stared at the ceiling and wiped his eyes as she dozed. Fingers combed into her hair to coax her off to an easier slumber.

Billy just laid there. Felt numb. Felt too much. Couldn't look down at Evie nestled into his body.

He stayed there two hours. So still. So lost. So found.

These sensations that tried to drown him. They were creeping like dark gossamer veils over his eyes. Unable to be near Evie, he eased out from under her. Rubbed his eyes. Felt like she seared his skin down to bone and marrow.

He knew it was wrong. Knew it might hurt her. *Would* hurt her.

She let him into her heart and he was running. Eros fleeing Psyche the moment she held that candle to his being and saw him for what he was. One speck of wax dripping hot upon his flesh. Blinded by that light, he probably didn't see her crying there after him. Selfish boy.

Billy thought he would be sick. Tremored there. He just couldn't stop it. Couldn't explain it either.

And he just couldn't be near her anymore. *Fuck*.

But, he promised. He promised her. He wanted to keep it and instead scrambled to dress. Empty eyes still staring at nothing. Billy finally peered back. Scanned Evie comfortable on the bed. He could have gotten back in. Woken her and told her that he wanted to be all hers too.

"I'm sorry." He whimpered.

It hurt. It hurt too much. Billy actually had to rub his chest. Tried to numb. Tried. All this time they spent together and now he just couldn't be near her. She broke him. Billy felt himself climbing too high. Up toward the stars. Falling to pieces.

Aimless steps brought him outside. Into the freezing cold. Away from Evie's touch and amber perfume. Away from this girl who gave him exactly what he wanted and it was just too much. He couldn't hold it. Didn't want to see it shatter before him.

So, Billy got into his Camaro and drove off. Far away as he could to the edge of Lover's Lake. Up a hill so he could see the quiet city before him. Evie would wake up. Feel the change that he promised he wouldn't give her.

Fuck.

"Fuck!" Billy crumbled aloud. One fist pushed into his teeth. Quivering until the tears fell hot. Huge and wet down his flushed cheeks. Unable to stop the flow, Billy dropped his head. Began to sob louder than he ever had in his life.

Because this would break her in turn. Validate everything horrid she thought about Billy Hargrove. Because he should have stayed in that bed mapping more kisses down her spine. Instead, he convinced himself that they weren't made of the same stardust. They couldn't be.

Evie's heart-shaped shadow box was hung too far from reach amid untold galaxies and when Billy rose to admire it, his wings melted like Icarus before him because that's what he deserved. That was always what he knew he deserved.

All he could think about was his mother in that tub. Neil's boot squelching his back and the meaty wack of a belt. It wasn't possible for him to be something that could be tangible and loved. Evie had been right. Stars were placed in a certain order and that couldn't change. He'd been stupid. Hopeful.

He was the coward. This got too real and he couldn't just let himself have it.

And what made it heavier was the pure thought of Evie waking alone to confirm her biggest fear.

"I'm sorry." Billy kept chanting these words that were so often too

difficult for him. They wouldn't stop this time. "I'm sorry..."

Notes for the Chapter:

Local boy crushed under the weight of his own emotions. Eeeep, I finally let them do the deed. Someone make them a 'congrats on your sex' cake.

Thank you all so much for reading!! Please hang out and chat with me below or on tumblr, Alias-B, if you have time. :)))

18. The Neon Demon

Notes for the Chapter:

So sorry the chapter took so long!!! Hope it was worth the wait!! Stoked to share more of Evie and Billy's story with you all and thank you, readers, for all the support! Things culminate between these two at a big house party. Evie digs into a side of herself she buried away, unsure which face is real. Billy tries to make amends as they try to touch some common ground. TW: Drinking, marijuana use, and vomiting.

Birds chirped over the rose trellises beyond the window.

Evie shifted over. Heard an alarm going off she hadn't set and moaned. Threw herself over to smack it. Vaguely hungover, she lifted up. Hand sinking out aimless toward Billy's frame and...

"Hmmm." She rubbed her eyes and pushed up. Expected the warmth of a boy she still felt in her sore bones. In her marrow.

The night reeled back. Crystal clear. The worship of flesh. Cartoon hearts bursting vibrant colors to rain down. Flames that became little kisses upon silk skin.

One arm brought the blanket up to her bare chest. An odd shame of being naked alone in an empty bed crept. Evie looked around and didn't see his clothing. Didn't see any trace of him. Tried not to sink.

She'd hoped to see him nude and draped in a sheet. Glow and beautiful like Cupid himself. Sleeping sound because she was with him. Her stunning Eros with kiss-stained lips and deft fingers. Careful enough to pluck stars down and rearrange them.

"Billy?" Evie swallowed. She shuffled up and pulled some clothing on. Felt her skin crawl to an edge when the door got banged on.

"Okay, lovebirds, I know you heard the alarm! We can't be late!" Heather had a sly smile when Evie swung the door back. "Looks like

someone had a Happy Birthday.”

Confused lashes batted.

“Did...Did Billy leave?” Evie loathed how insecure she sounded. Heather’s smile fell.

“Oh? Ah, he probably ran home to get his shit, you know? Pick up Max. Tommy and Carol left too. Steve’s getting up now. I’ll just take you to school.” Heather bit her lip. “So...how’d it go?”

Evie felt the luna moths flutter at that. Had to look aside. *It was perfect*, she wanted to say.

“Thanks...for looking out. You and Carol, I assume.”

“Guilty.” Heather grinned. “C’mon, clean up and get ready! I’ll make some toast downstairs.”

Evie nodded, clearly distracted. Billy’s just getting ready elsewhere. He’ll roll up to her locker all cheeky and sly. Kiss her better. Kiss her in front of all of them without a care and all her fears will fade away. Lost in the wind. And Billy will make those obscene comments that melt rose petals in her cheeks.

So, she floated. Remembered his voice in her ear and his lips. All over. Those eyes intent and drinking her down. Hands. Hands. Hands.

Splitting from Heather, she perked to see above the crowd for a flash of gold curls. Feather wings and a glittering halo. Wished for a reviving kiss. She craved it. She craved him. And there was nothing.

Evie lingered at her locker. Tried to hear the roar of a Camaro above student chatter. They all looked at her like they knew. Knew all her dirty secrets and what they cost. Unsettled, Evie went to first period.

She managed to twitch smiles at Tommy and Carol’s suggestive looks. They seemed genuinely happy for her. Carol chewed her pen and quirked her brow. Tried to ask wordlessly how it was. How Billy explored her skin to map it. How he prayed softly between her

thighs. How he moaned her name and filled her soul with him.

Evie pressed her lips wider in response. Shrugged. Tommy peered at his girlfriend. Noted something was off.

And Billy never showed up to school.

By the study period, Evie was crying in a bathroom stall. Crying over a boy. A pretty boy who slept with her and disappeared. Crying because her biggest fear was coming true. Silent whimpers into her sleeve.

How fucking cliché.

It hadn't even been twenty-four hours.

Evie hated herself and how sensitive she'd become. How easy it was to shatter. Maybe since her dad left. Since her mother really started to pull away. People took and then they vanish.

"Fenny?" A voice broke through the stall and Evie sniffled abruptly. Two tennis shoes hit the floor covered in obscene scribbles. "Evie?" The tone on the other end was sniffing too.

"Robin?" Evie blinked.

"Yeah."

"What are you...?"

"Competing with you for some teen angst bullshit apparently." Robin made this squeaking sound and Evie realized she was drawing on the bathroom wall. "I guess this is the best bathroom to do it in."

Evie chuckled and wiped her eyes.

"I hate boys."

"Believe me, girls ain't any better," Robin grumbled to herself. "What's his name?"

"You'll roll your eyes. It's stupid. I was stupid."

“No, you’re not.” A marker resumed. Filling big blocks of nasty writing in to cover it. “Girls write shitty things on the bathroom walls about each other. Why do we do that?”

“Easier if we’re pitted against each other, I guess.” Evie shrugged. Head tipping against the metal side. “Plenty of stuff about me.”

“Not anymore actually. Someone else filled it before I could.” Her response had Evie blinking.

Did Carol...?

“You’re doing the world a service.” Evie gathered her bag close. Sighed out. “Gonna sneak out of here.”

“Godspeed.” Robin chirped. “He’s the idiot. Not you.”

“Thanks,” Evie hitched this laugh, “hope your problem partner takes it easy on you too.”

“Appreciate it.” Robin blew air out her lips. “Hate high school.”

“Agreed.” Evie came to approach the mirror. Cleaned her face with cool water. Snuck out and decided walking home in the cold was best. Hood up over unruly curls.

Billy’s Camaro was nestled in the garage mocking her.

She could sit on her porch. Wait and count the minutes until he comes out to pick up Max from school. Maybe Max was sick and he had to stay with her. She caught a flash of a face peeking through the curtains that disappeared just as quick. Evie felt herself crush. Billy was avoiding her.

A thousand reasons flashed to obscure the fact that he’d fucked her and ran.

Fresh ire prickled her marrow before Evie marched into her house. Greeted Blue and fed the little kitten. Mona left a note on the fridge.

“Be in tomorrow afternoon if I can. We’ll do dinner this week. Presents on the sofa for you. Extra cake in the fridge. Love you!”

PS: You haven't seen my dangle faux pearl earrings, have you? Those heavy ones you loathe! One's missing! Keep an eye out! I'm counting on you, baby. xoxo!"

Mona had another date. Evie wondered if this one would stick around. If she'd inevitably see a strange man in their kitchen eating cereal from her favorite bowl again.

The earring made her cringe because she was pretty sure she'd swallowed one she found vacuuming under the couch. Giving it back when it passed felt...too weird.

A huff left as she went to take her little gifts to her desk. Couple books and tapes she'd wanted. More jewelry. More craft items. Trinkets she could swallow. Mona fed her well.

Evie winced at herself. She wouldn't do it. Not over Billy. Unable to stop herself, she kept checking the window. Peered at Billy's closed blinds. Maybe he was ill too.

As if Billy would choose to stay home even if he were ill.

"Fuck." Evie plucked up the phone. Dialed. Slammed it down. "You're being pathetic."

Instead, she mashed her face into feather pillows. Screamed. Smeared makeup all over cotton crying so hard.

What's worse is all Evie wanted was her mother to come in and hold her.

** **

That welling fire of resentment only grew within her belly overnight. Friday had Evie dressing her absolute best. Getting up an extra hour early to pamper herself and pick an outfit.

Maybe something to hide how small and pathetic she still felt. *Brave face. No tears. They'll just rust you.* That's what Mona would say. *You're a dangerous girl, Evie. You don't need tears. Pretty up and show them what they're missing.*

She told herself she wouldn't let Billy Hargrove see the pain. Not again.

The one promise he made her, he broke.

Tucking a black tee into a red suspender skirt, Evie adjusted her tights and finished up. Curls bouncing all directions. Earrings glimmered as she went out. Ate one piece of burnt toast. Mona would be on her way to the salon fixing her makeup in the rearview mirror.

Billy's Camaro was in the exact spot it was left yesterday. Steve's BMW rolled up not even a minute later.

"Hey, sorry," he tossed his backpack behind him, "Hargrove not coming in again?"

"I don't know." Evie buckled so he took off. Eyes ahead.

"You okay?"

"Fine."

Steve changed the music station. Sighed out.

"So-"

"I slept with him." Evie snapped and Steve's eyes got huge. Knuckles paled on the wheel. "Billy. I slept with him at Heather's and he disappeared and he won't call. He won't see me. He got what he wanted after weeks of prying and I'm so stupid, I just let him."

She wobbled but didn't well.

"Ooh..." Steve managed, huge eyes blinking at the wheel. "Hey, ah, Evie. It's not your fault. If he's gonna be an ass, it's not on you."

"I just." Evie pressed her lips. Braced to get the thought out that ached too much. "I thought he liked me."

"I like you, Evie." He tried, eyes shifting. Profound and sincere. "I like you." Evie softened at him and his huge eyes. "He's being an idiot."

Steve hugged her after they parked. Evie wiggled out of the car and hurried down alone. Dodged around high schoolers holding her coat close to get to her locker and sort books.

“Still nothing?” Carol appeared with Tommy wrapped around her moments later. Evie peered at them and shrugged.

“I mean, from the sounds of it, I got a good feeling through those walls.” Tommy earned a hard elbow in the ribs for that one as Evie smacked her locker shut. Carol hissed him to silence. “Ow! It was a compliment.”

“Ignore him.” Carol stole Evie under her arm so they could walk with Tommy trailing behind. “Here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to put on something revealing and come to the party tomorrow on Loch Nora. Tommy and I will drive you.”

“Yeah, show him what he’s missing.” Tommy followed suit.

“Aren’t you his number two, Hagen?” Evie mocked Tommy and he only laughed.

“Girlfriend comes first and if he’s on Carol’s bad side, I back off. I’m a good boyfriend like that.” Tommy smirked to himself. Got his other arm around Evie as they went along. A voice for each ear. “You need a good party. Get a load off.”

“Just dance. Get drunk. Wear something tight and red. Ignore him.” Carol led them through the crowds. “Flirt with other big fish.”

“Not in the mood to flirt, guys.” Evie pouted and caught Heather at the end of the hallway giving them an odd look. Idly waving, Evie was veered into class first. Carol and Tommy stole the desks next to and in front of her in the back corner of the room. “I always go to parties with Heather.”

“Duh, she’ll be there.” Carol piped up as the resident princess sat down diagonal from Evie. “Won’t you, Heather? We’re going to cheer Evie up this weekend since Billy would rather cast his jerk disappearing act.”

“Hell.” Heather’s eyes rolled. “Prick... I’d go, but I have dinner with

my parents. Maybe I can sneak out early. I don't know. We could hit the next one?"

"Boo," Carol mocked, "then we'll just take Evie and have fun while you play domestic. I need to rage after what happened with Vicki." Heather hesitated, eyes trying to reach Evie's but she was scribbling in her notebook. Head on her hand.

"Do you think that's really a good idea?" Heather continued slower. Asking Evie but she didn't peer up.

"No," Tommy flashed the cheesiest grin he could, "we think it's a *great* idea."

"Look, we can hit the next one or show up late, I can meet you—"

"I want to go." Evie decided, cutting into the conversation. "Carol can come over and help me pick my outfit. I want Billy Hargrove to starve."

"I thought you'd say that, Fen," Carol about cackled at that with Tommy joining in. Evie steadily becoming their new center. Heather blinked a couple of times. They always did that together if they could. Even over the phone hours before.

Evie was allowed other friends. Heather hung out with Robin and Tammy. Even though she could cut the tension between them with a butter knife and was certain they were hooking up. She had Steve too. Evie adored Steve, but he didn't party anymore. Carol went through something bad and she relates to Evie.

That's fine. They're fine.

"Oh...okay." A distance pooled.

"Don't worry, Heather, we'll look after each other. I'll keep her in once piece for you. Evie and I have real shit now. Shared trauma." Carol wore it like a piece of flashy jewelry and Heather's shoulders rose.

"You should try to come, Heather," Evie voiced at last like she still wanted her there.

"I'll try to swing by, check on you guys." She faced the front. Felt this pang at Carol and Evie giggling behind her.

Sweet Heather Holloway couldn't begin to understand what they'd experienced. She knew that. Those evils in life that hadn't touched her or seeped into her pretty mansion on Loch Nora. Her parents weren't the happiest but they played well and they were never cruel to her. They didn't put monsters under her bed. She hadn't been hit by bigger hands. Made to grow up not loving herself.

She glanced at Evie's easier smile as the teacher came in. Tommy H and Carol flocking her.

Was she their new king?

** **

"Wear the fishnets instead of the lace." Carol was going through drawers and flinging things out on the bed. "You matched your bra and panties like I said, right?"

"Yeah, but...the fishnets? Those are, ah, for Halloween."

"Well, if Billy wants to act like a fucking ghost, we can get spooky too." The quip actually had Evie laughing. "Plus, they'll look better with the red plaid skirt. Perfectly length. Tight. You have a nice ass and great hips, show them off." Carol dolled herself up with some dark teal colors. Red hair high as can be.

"If he doesn't want to see me still, he probably won't even come." Evie was wiggling into the tights and unbuttoning her skirt to get them up.

"Well, you're still going to look good and have fun. We deserve some fun, don't we?" Carol checked the time, fussing over Evie. Pulling her shirt just a little lower. Hands even pushed her tits up into her bra, causing Evie to snicker again.

"I got it, jeez." She had laughed, adjusting the straps.

"I do this for a living, sweetness. You're perfect. You look *positively* dangerous." Carol clapped her manicured hands. Evie thought of her

mother briefly.

"Almost ready?"

"Yes, Tommy should be swinging back around soon." Red swooping locks shifted while bright eyes peered out the window. "He's really stayed out of sight? Billy."

"Yeah, sometimes I see his shadow moving. My phone rang a couple times and then abruptly hung up when I tried to answer. Not creepy at all. And I...I tried to call a few times. His line never picked up. It actually went dead. He unplugged the phone earlier so I gave up."

"Who knew Hargrove was a coward?"

"He got what he wanted out of me." Evie shrugged, blotting a dark red lipstick on a tissue. "It's whatever."

"Please, we both know if Billy only wanted to fuck you, he'd be at school flirting with some other hapless soul." Hands went to Carol's hips. "Not saying he still doesn't suck at the moment."

"Billy doesn't want me, it doesn't matter." Evie asserted as a horn honked while she dotted perfume. "Let's just go."

She gazed at the moon outside. A huge, illuminated eye looking down at the world. Evie wanted so badly for it to notice her. To give her the spotlight. To feel a cleansing light that would open up her delicate petals. She wouldn't feel so lost and dirty among weeds. And then the rest of the world could caress her too. Understand her completely. See her. Feel her. She'd be whole and real. Make a heart that was a forever home. Unbroken.

Do you even see me?

"Evie, c'mon!" Carol waved, opening the car door.

Stars twinkled to flash like rabid paparazzi. Blindly, Evie Fenny followed them.

Billy Hargrove peeked through the curtains at the front of his house

to spot Evie with Tommy and Carol. Skipping with glee to venture out as the sky fell. A pit welled. He fucked up. He tried to face her and fucking ran. Tried to call and hung up. Skipping school was risky that first day, taking Max and disappearing. Two days of disappearing and waiting for Neil to lay him out for it.

"Hey."

"Fuck!" Billy jolted upon turning to Max staring pointed behind him. "What?"

"Why are you being a damn creep?" She narrowed until he looked almost aghast.

"I have my reasons." Billy went around her all too confident about that. "Why are you being a bitch lately?"

"I have my reasons." Max rubbed her arm through a long sleeve. "You messed things up with Evie again, didn't you?"

"Max, you should be used to me being a colossal fuck up." He went past Susan in the kitchen toward his room. Neil went out on a beer run. Naturally.

Max tailed after her brother.

"I broke up with Lucas." She admitted in his room. Feet shifting. "You're not the only one cutting friends out."

"Huh?" Billy fell into his bed. Tried not to engage, but she looked like a kicked puppy there. "Why? All you did was make eyes at that kid."

"I just don't think I'm a great girlfriend. Keeping things from my friends. Things happen in this house and I can't talk about it. They're always trying to help me, I hate it." She sniffed. "They can't do anything."

Billy lit a cigarette near his cracked window. Offered her the first toke which she took, coughing, and gave it back.

"Just get some decent grades and get out of here."

"I get good grades and it doesn't make anything better. So do you." She swallowed, frowning. "It doesn't matter. I can hang out with them...just at a distance, you know?"

"Yeah." Billy understood the distance. He eyed her. Seemed she was so far away. "You're a little shitbird to me, but you probably aren't a shitty girlfriend. Either way." The word sounded so funny on his tongue. Evie wouldn't have been a shitty girlfriend either. Not even close. He tried not to scoff, perking as the phone rang so Max watched him answer, cigarette perched between his lips. "Hargrove."

"You fucking asshole prick."

"Princess Heather, nice combo." *Fuck.* He peered at Max who only sat on his beaten sofa to watch him. "Listen-"

"No, you listen. I'm only calling because if anything inside you cared about Evie, you'd get your ass to that party on Loch Nora. I can't be there and she's not well. She's with Tommy and Carol who seem to like her now, but Carol's going down a similar road and I don't think Tommy can wrangle them in. Bowers stole her and he threw her and he *broke* her. He broke my best friend. I don't expect you to understand that. Watching someone you love fade away helplessly! I can't-"

"Heather-" Billy felt this hot blade ease into his chest.

"Please, just...can you be decent for two seconds and go watch her? I'm stuck with my parents until late. Listen, I don't know...what you have with Evie. But it made her happy and I think you felt something. *Anything.*" Heather welled. "Evie's never gonna tell me when something is wrong and I just have to accept that. I rubbed stuff in her face growing up. My perfect life. My perfect everything, she's scared of me. Her mom messed her up and her dad, I think he... please, Billy? I'm...I'm sorry, just please go see her."

A lengthy sigh followed.

"Fine, I'll check on her."

One click and Billy hung up, paling as he lurched to go to the closet

and dress.

"Gotta go somewhere." He tossed his shirt aside. Mulled it over before turning to Max. "Don't cut your stupid friends out. They're better than what you have in this place. Anything is better than this fucking room. This house."

Anger crossed his face. Boiled the expression like he might explode and take Hawkins down with him. Used to make her shrink, but it didn't this time. Billy's fury seemed so righteous today. He asked Max something huge he always seemed to hint in their time of knowing each other, but never said aloud.

"You wanna be like me, Maxine?" Billy said it so hard, it veered from sounding wounded. Almost.

Max really considered it. Met his luminous eyes.

"You're not all bad." She just frowned and got up. No real quip. No fire. Left to her room. Billy changed and cologned himself. Ready in record time before he was stealing his keys to go out. The Camaro revved. Squealed down Cherry Lane toward a dark hard pit.

** ** *

Evie started the night with offered shots. Filled a cup full of sweet jungle juice and moved against the bodies all over the mansion. A smoky colored haze filled the edges around her. She swayed to music as she shared a joint with Carol in a couple of pool chairs outside later. No Billy. No Tannen. Vicki and Tina kept a distance from Carol, too.

Total peace, she hoped. Order restoring itself.

"How do you guys paint your faces like that?" Tommy reached for Carol's cheek and got a light smack on the hand. He was completely blazed, sighing into cool night air as a beat echoed and kegs were set up across the way.

"You'll smear it." Carol had chided.

"Very carefully," Evie answered the question, "I can't believe I'm

here hanging out with Tommy H and Carol. You guys used to kick sand at Heather and I in kindergarten.”

Cackles followed. Evie joined in.

“Fucking asshole kids.” She sat up and checked her lipstick in the tiny compact.

Across the grass, one of the football stars noticed her. Peachy tan. Soft black locks. Aqua eyes. Chiseled and bulky with toned muscles. Staring pointedly as his friends got the kegs going. She blushed and looked away. Carol smacked her arm.

“Um, that Hill Valley left tackle was totally scoping you out.” She hissed. “Go play *hello titty* with him.”

“Not interested. Ugh, already dated a Hill Valley football boy.”

“They’re dumb and sweet, go snag another.” Carol pushed. “Always enough to go around.”

“Rather get another cup of punch.” Evie stood up, fixing her skirt before shoes clicked off. Carol booed her and relaxed into Tommy as he lit another joint.

Evie had her hand poised over the bowl when she looked across the room and caught Billy being greeted at the door. Green shirt unbuttoned. Faded black leather. Stunning as all hell. Beautiful with so much ease like it was nothing to him.

On cue, he locked into her. No time ticking. No music. No raging teens. Just Evangeline.

Too many emotions for her to read. Evie prepared a lengthy speech to give him a piece of her mind. Instead, she dropped her red plastic cup in the sink and headed back out the door in a flash. She passed Tommy, Carol, and others sitting around the pool. Got to the side of the house before Billy was snatching her elbow. His voice came into focus over the music.

“Don’t!” She jerked away and he put his hands up. “Don’t.” Was all she got out. Eyes fierce on his and looking away. Alone, they heard

crickets in the dark distance. Music blaring a beat. Cold air wafted.

“Evie.” He began. At the utter of her name, her eyes went dead. No light. Nothing. Just ice.

“Listen, Billy, it really doesn’t matter.” She gestured with both hands. Flashed a sardonic smile and stayed level. “You got what you wanted. You’re absolved. Just move on and I can too.”

“No, fuck, listen.” He kept reaching out like he might touch her and recoiled. “I know that I fucked up.”

“Fucked up? As in spent months buttering me up out of some game or guilt so I’d fuck you and you could walk away freely? Manipulating my feelings because yours are all twisted and fucked, you just couldn’t help yourself? Can’t get off so fuck Fat Fenny and break the curse.” She laughed a cruel sound at him. “Honestly, if I’d known fucking you would get you to leave me alone, I would have done it months ago.”

She tried to push around him. Fingers looped around her wrist.

“It’s not-”

“Not like that? You said that before. Just do us both a favor and fuck off. It’s fine, Billy, really.” Her smile cracked. “I got wrapped up into it and that’s my fault. You can go fuck anyone you want again, be their fucking King, you earned it. Sorry, I don’t have a medal for you. Just leave me the hell alone because I deserve someone who gives a shit when I put my heart on the line!”

Evie welled at that. Tried to stop it. Billy actually winced. Let her go and shrunk.

“I deserve to be with someone who isn’t a...a fucking coward.” She leaned toward him, vibrating with pain and rage. “Game’s over. We’re done. Go live your best fucking life and stay out of mine.”

She shuffled to go, paused, and couldn’t help letting one shred of emotion slip through the cracks.

“I really fucking believed in it. You’re mean and maybe I sound like

a child, but you're truly a mean person and I just...fuck, I thought maybe there was something else there. But, that was my mistake too. You just...took all that I gave and ignored me."

"I fucked up. I ran. I just couldn't..." Cold air puffed. "It was too much, I just couldn't be near you for a moment. You started saying all that... I-I don't do this shit."

"Neither do I and I'm not an easy person to get through, but I still gave you as much as I could and I didn't run when the time came to own my shit."

"What are you doing now?" His own ire etched.

"Not letting you hurt me again." Evie spun on her heel to go. Avoided eyes while she went around the house and back in for that drink.

Billy dented the paneling on the side of the house with his fist. Didn't even feel it because his chest wailed.

Evie sank another full drink. Had some people cheering her on through it around the kitchen island. She reveled in the attention. Wanted more. So much more.

Billy stood in the doorway with his eyes and their fire flickering. Came over and stole a drink for himself so she went off again with a new cup. Up the stairs into the bathroom to be rid of him.

"I'm not done." He tailed after. Walls shaking as he crammed himself into the space with her. Simmering, Evie slammed her cup down, splashing it.

"Fucking fuck off, Billy!" Evie sneered at him.

"We're not done talking!" He echoed over the music, finger poised before he drank his cup and then hers to make a point.

"Asshole!"

"Yeah, I fucked you and I fucking ran. I'm that asshole. Maybe I proved you right, maybe you wanted me to fail. I don't give a shit,

Evie. I followed you around cause I liked you. I liked just...*being* around you. Maybe I felt guilty for the shit I pulled, I don't care because you...you're...a real pain in my ass actually." He hitched a ragged breath, hands up to grasp syllables in sheer frustration.

"Old news!" She bit back ruefully.

"I don't do this. I don't chase. I don't get close. I don't fucking date. But, being around you, I wanted to try and I fucking tried. I'm still trying and I'm shitty at it, I know. But, I fucking like you, Evie. You're a pain. You have some serious fucking trust issues-"

"No longer than yours." She snapped. Up in his face now.

"No shit, we fit together and you don't wanna admit that. You're just as scared as I am and you're a fucking runner same as me."

"Which one of us woke up alone in that bed? Was that me or you? Which one of us avoided the other for two fucking days? Do you have any idea how fucking..." Evie tremored the word. "...*ugly* you made me feel? I spent all that time wondering what I did wrong? Wondering if I was just in some stupid fantasy. I tried to reach out and you turned away."

"It was real." He seized.

"You couldn't possibly understand what I felt. Billy Hargrove is beautiful and...and he's eloquent and he gets whoever he wants. You get to run away when it suits you because you're gorgeous and untouchable and to an extent, that's a safety net, and I'm not dealing with that. God forbid people are ugly or different, they're treated like they're not even real. Not even human. But, I'm real! I am!"

"I just want you!" He cried out at last. Words piled together. "You know how much easier it would be to talk about this if I liked you less?"

Sound shattered and they stared. Lost. Found. Evie shrugged, head shaking.

"You had me, Billy," she seethed, "and you ran."

“I fucked up. That’s what I do, I fuck up.”

“I can’t be a test dummy for all your fuck ups!” Evie bellowed, pushing to get around him before he stumbled to press them both into the wall.

“Listen, I know. I get it. I really fucking hurt you. Let me just make it up to you.” Billy grasped at her. Fell to his knees. “Lemme make you feel good, I’ll make it up to you.” His voice dripped in desperation. Got low as he felt up her skirt. “Evie. Let me make it right.”

“Sex isn’t a ‘get out of jail free’ card, Billy.” She wiggled out of his grip and pried out of the bathroom. Left him there on his knees. Ire sparked. Evie wasn’t going to cry. She wasn’t going to swallow foreign objects. Fuck Billy Hargrove and his hands and his pretty eyes and his body against hers and how he made her feel.

Another drink. Another smoke. Another bout of them glaring at each other across rooms full of bodies. Evie Fenny was invisible. Against a sea of souls and music. She didn’t make noise. She didn’t touch grief or anger in the open.

So, fuck it. Fuck everything.

Chanting echoed outside. Her cup smacked the sink before she went out. Billy hurt her and she was drunk and high and stupid so she wanted to needle him back. Perfect Billy with his perfect hair and perfect following. He was always unobtainable to her. Always able to wipe his hands and walk away in a flood of fireworks that the whole world ogled at. Always forgiven.

And then there was Evangeline Fenny who got stepped on in the hallway and who was ignored even when she screamed in the open. She screamed and no one saw her standing right there. Not her father. Not Mona. Not Hawkins. Evie, who was cast with a faulty mold so they tossed her in a pile to sink.

Maybe it terrified her that Billy did see her.

“Who’s next?!” Came calls from the keg.

Evangeline wanted her name in lights and she wanted the cheering even if it was empty. It was something tangible. Something she could touch. Something that could touch her back. Her world was made up of the beautiful and the invisible.

And she clawed to reach the other side of the veil. To rule the hallowed ground all for herself because this wasn't going to be her life. She wanted to taste that magnificent stardust she dreamed of all her existence and she wanted it all to herself now. Flying high and above these souls that once tore her far asunder. Mutilated her. Looked down and sneered.

Do you even see me? The cries echoed out from her heart. A spear of heaven's light tore into her. Relentlessly and without remorse. Evie peered down at her hands and saw fists balling up. Looked up at the moon. Let the light fill her eyes.

Just watch me now.

“Hey!” She moved through the crowd. Felt the eyes on her as she approached the meathead jocks who cheered her on for beating Brock Tannen to a pulp. “I want a try.”

The Hill Valley cutie smiled broad at her.

“In a skirt, little lady?” His southern twang had her teeth flashing.

“Guess I’m trusting you to hold it up for me. Up for the task...?” She cocked her head.

“Ah, Stan McGinley. You’re the Fenny girl. Evangeline. Legend around these parts. You beat up Tannen.”

For once, Evie owned it.

“Tannen was nothing, he got in my way. So, are you boys strong enough to hold me up?” Dark cherry lips rose. Billy stood in the grass. Ignored. A stupid look on his face.

“No fucking way is she doing that,” Tommy H appeared at his right with huge, dewy eyes. “Fucked up bad, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t think...she’d get this upset.”

“You chased her two months. Fucked her once. Then you ran, man. You ignored her. She probably could have gotten one word from you and been fine.”

And Billy promised her he wouldn’t. It was the only thing he promised. The only thing she wanted.

They both watched Evie get lifted by jocks. Reveling it as the cheers lasted. Curls spilling when the count began.

“Even I think this is too far, she won’t beat it.” Tommy winced. A beat. “I’m...pretty sure.”

“Tommy, you ever see a furious girl not get her way out of spite?” Billy hissed as Evie steadied herself and gulped. Upside down. Eyes flashing at him whenever students parted like the sea. Jocks holding her and touching her and keeping her skirt high.

“Yeah, you’re fucked.” Tommy clapped his shoulder with a huge, crooked smile. Actually laughed as he went.

“Hey! Where the hell are you going?”

“Getting a front-row seat with Carol, she’s pissed at you too! Girlfriend rules, Billy!” Tommy jogged off.

Billy scoffed. No fucking way. Evie would make herself sick smashing his record just to rub salt in the wound.

But, she was raging. And high. And drunk.

And fearless now.

“Fuck.” Billy rubbed his eyes. Alone there. He even peered to see if Steve had come. At least Harrington would help stop this. A black shadow pulled over him. Made him invisible.

Did Billy want it stopped?

Evie had been shoved aside all her life. She wanted to be better. To

be the best. Wanted the feel that she wasn't trying to be the brightest star, instead that these teens were all trying to be like her.

So, he just stood there. Listened to the count until it hit forty-three. Forty-four. *Forty-five*. Smashing his record and then some. Howls echoed toward the bright moon. Werewolves calling for their change in leadership.

Evangeline Fenny. Wobbling and true. The new Keg King. They all roared for her.

Beer dripped from her plush lips. She threw her hands up. Giggling too vibrant as the jocks plucked her up to parade her around. Not worried about her size. Psyche gaining her own entry into Mount Olympus. She didn't need Eros to be an extraordinary god, she put the work in.

"You deserve it, B. Dumbass." Carol gave Billy's chest a pat as she passed with Tommy's arm in her grip.

Evie was let down. Full of laughter. Arms around the McGinley boy. Not even looking at Billy, she kissed another pair of lips when they were offered.

"Wanna go inside and dance...up on me?" She slurred, earning a laugh.

"You bet." Stan went with her into the ocean of grinding bodies. Boys who never spared Evangeline two glances caressed her as if she was some gold relic that would give them good luck for the rest of their days. She sang loudly. Not hearing anything. Just the cheers of her name.

For a night, they loved her. Let her take the lead. Evie let that fuel the needed vanity in her heart. Finally understood Billy's front. Made one that was even greater. She spun her web of silk and cosmos.

Not seeing the golden boy at the punch bowl dunking a cup in. Tossing it aside because he was somehow too upset to drink himself to death.

Neil would have loved it too much and that made him furious.

Billy just stood there in the pulse. Utterly alone. Still watching her because it was the least he could do. Keep her safe. Respect the distance. Watch as she took the spotlight all to herself because she'd earned it. Popular girls gushed about her. Admired her hair and makeup. Flirted.

Boys scooted in closer. Vied for attention and wishing they could pluck her petals.

"I love this color, Evangeline." A Ridgemont girl's thumb traced the curve under Evie's mouth. Lashes fluttering and shimmer. "You look good enough to eat."

"The color's called Red Rum." Evie's curls bounced as she crossed her legs to sit upon a table. Surrounded by a court of teens from all schools. Eager sheep to flock and listen to her, their new Messiah. Asking for tips. Basking in her glory. Wondering for all her secrets. "My lipstick. They say us girls are more likely to buy lipstick if it's named after food or sex. Guess they're not wrong."

They hung upon her syllables from little strings. Laughed on cue. Fawned. Story after story. Flash after flash. A thousand photo finishes for her budding editorial.

Beauty isn't everything, the haughty magazines Mona filled their house with all painted her brain, *it's the only thing*. Evie wanted to enter rooms and be the sun. A singular point of orbit and she wanted them all to burn for her. To reach out and caress her skin, risking fire for just one touch. Just one.

Razor sharp vanity. Evie didn't care for an hour what it would make of her. What she would be next. What would happen when these beautiful demons devoured her at last until nothing was left. She was in total control.

Carol peered at Billy still across the way. Intent. Glossy lips tugged. Perched to Evie's right as some royal advisor or sovereign Duchess herself, she admired her nails and cocked her head.

"Where did you come from Evangeline?" Stan edged in to lean on the table.

“She fell from the sky into Hawkins’ lucky lap,” Carol spoke first. “My girl sings and dances. She beats keg records to dethrone the unworthy King before it. She leveled Brock Tannen all by herself. And she’s *obscenely* single.”

Evie pushed at her friend lightly, eyes-rolling. Playing into it with grace.

“Ignore her,” Evie bit her lip, lashes fluttering as she played this new version of herself tonight.

A version they all wanted. The daughter Mona longed for. Maybe her father would have stayed for this girl. Twirling curls and opulent eyes. Dripping neon nectar and glitter along a sea of utter black. A budding, painted demon in heels, she joked to herself. A neon demon. A dangerous girl swaying in the pale moonlight. Bleeding ruby red. Ethereal and fangs that illuminated.

“I’m single.” She explained, smooth as silk with one hand trailing up Stan’s shirt. “Not obscene.”

“Is that right? Well, I beg to differ.” A smile etched. His palm shifted up her spine.

“Look around,” Evie continued, “far more obscenity than I could dream up.”

“I only see you, Evangeline.” He purred, steady on those dark eyes. She felt a thrill rush her bones. “You wanna go somewhere quieter?”

Evie didn’t wait for Carol to shove her.

Fingers laced as they left the laughing and overlapping conversations aside. Immediately, a huge body was on hers the moment they found a room.

Evie felt down his broad chest. Whined. Kissed drunken and feverishly until they were on the bed. Shirts off. Rolling around.

“I have condoms.” He uttered as Evie slowed. Eyes on the ceiling. Stan didn’t smell like Billy. More pine and new car freshness. Her awareness seemed to touch the earth for the first time in hours.

It wasn't bad. It just wasn't Billy.

Rough hands with thick calluses. Still something too sweet about it all. Lips edged her neck and she shuddered.

Stan wasn't Billy and she loathed herself for wishing he was. Lashing back didn't make her feel better with Tannen and it only made her feel worse with Billy. Something cracked. Magazines shredding. Mirrors shattering.

Maybe he had a perfectly good reason for running and maybe he didn't.

Evangeline liked him either way. That fire spread.

"Hey." Evie came up for air. This was her. This also wasn't her. Not knowing who she was anymore. Who she wanted to be. She let her thoughts tumble and realized what she still wanted at that exact moment. What she would want before and after all of this was Billy. "You're...fucking hot and you're sweet and I'm...fuck." She eyed his chest again. Mourned the loss of an orgasm. "You're really hot."

"Thanks." He actually chuckled, offered her shirt in an understanding motion. "I get it, darlin'. Too bad."

"Yeah, I know. I was into it, it's not you." Evie smiled, pushing her curls back. "Ugh, it's me. It's my fault this time. Ah, shit."

"Someone else?" He spoke as they sat on the edge of the bed together. Evie nodded, tucking her clothing back into place. "They're lucky."

"They fucked up and then I fucked up and then I just kept at it cause I'm an idiot with too much pride." Evie would rather hurt herself first than let anyone else get the chance.

"Sounds like an even playing field." He took her chin and kissed her. Sweet as pie. Stan looked at her with a knowing grin. "See you around, Fenny. Stay dangerous. Stay obscene. It suits you." Evie waited for him to go and groaned. Falling back.

Still wobbling. Somehow drunk and perfectly sober, Evie lunged up

and skidded down the stairs. Looked around for Billy. Heart sinking.

Carol spotted her. Smiled bright.

"I told you, you owe me a buck." She muttered into Tommy.

"How'd you know she wouldn't follow through?"

"Cause she and Billy are both being stupid about this. I have to do everything here." Carol stole his joint, eyes-rolling.

Evie was beginning to panic. She'd chased him away at last. Didn't blame him this time. He could finally move on to the next lucky girl.

"Shit..." Evie held her coat close. Walked outside to the mass of cars along the street. Tried to spot the shiny blue of his Camaro. The electric color that always charged her veins.

"Billy!" She burst out, head turning to flicker her eyes all directions. Shoulders fell. "Bill-!"

"I'm right here, *Jesus*. You don't have to fucking scream." A rough voice chirped. Evie spun on her heel.

There he was. Smoking against the front of his car. Steely expression. Evie shuddered and came to him. Lip wobbling which was enough to make him weaken that hard resolve.

"I kissed someone else." She burst, wincing as she pointed to the house.

"I saw. Good looking guy." His brow rose. Billy stood taller to drop the smoke aside and smash it under his boot.

"I was gonna sleep with him."

"I bet you were."

"He had condoms." She sniffled.

A sigh.

"I bet he did, Evie."

"Ah, I...I beat your keg record and I'm still furious at you." Evie said that all too calmly, rubbing her arms.

"That's okay." He decided. "The record, I mean."

"Keg stands are stupid, I don't get it. Just drink normally."

"Yeah," he tried not to laugh, "they are."

"You made me feel really fucking...unwanted. You can be so mean." Evie's arms jutted out and fell. "Turns out I can be mean too."

"I know." He said. Accepting.

"But, I'm eager to jump on the unwanted train. My mom. Sometimes I feel like an accessory she pins to her hair and I just made myself fine with it because it's as close as I can get to her. We don't...talk. We don't get close either, not really, so I don't...I don't get close to anyone else."

"Yeah." He'd puffed out.

"And the fact is, I accepted that." Evie poured forth with the boldest truth she could grasp. "Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe there are a thousand reasons I shouldn't. But, it didn't seem important until I met you and-...I'm gonna go puke in the bushes real quick."

Evie passed him. Romantic tension breaking almost comically. Briefly using Billy's arm for support before she crossed to a tree and threw up into a bush with little ceremony. Seconds after pouring her heart out, the contents of her stomach followed. So much for the dreamy score in her head. Fingers wrapped around her arm while a hand pulled her curls up.

"Looks about right." Billy had mused there.

"Ugh, you think I'm gross." Evie puked again. Muscles tensing as he held her up. She tried to steady herself on the tree, hurling.

"I don't think you're gross, this isn't my first puke rodeo. I've had friends and enemies alike puke on me." Billy snickered. "And I've been pissed on. Was so high, I didn't even realize it was happening

until the end. I thought I was catching a sick wave.”

“Oh, god. Okay, that should be...” Evie spat and covered her lips. “No, I got more.”

She continued throwing up. Miserable. Finally finishing. Poor thing. Hair a mess with streaky makeup and red-rimmed eyes. Half crying. Evie heaved for air and stood back up to face him.

“As I was saying...”

“Evie.” Billy steadied her with two hands on her forearms. “You won’t remember this tomorrow.”

“Yes, I will,” she sniffled at him with wet cheeks in full bloom, “only cause it’s you.”

Billy gave a sharp exhale out his nose. That sentiment caressed him too sweetly. Lips became a tight line. Careful fingers rose to sweep a stray curl from her brow. The digits made a curve down her face.

“Gonna finish even if I puke again.” Evie inhaled deep. Shuddered with her eyes shut. “Billy. I’m a fucking runner. And I think the worst.”

He stared. One nod.

“I can’t possibly wrap myself around the idea that people...like me.” She went on. Not bothered by cold or clumping lashes. “And you run too. Emotions get real. Get high. You run away.”

“You either run or you stay and fight with me.” He remarked with a quirked brow. Evie looked aghast.

“I do not *always* try to fight you.” Came the instant aggression.

“...You’re serious, Angel?”

“Okay. Fine... Fair.” She caved, rubbing under one eye. “What I’m trying to say is...I’m a mess. I shouldn’t have been with Fredrick. I shouldn’t have pretended to be fine for my mother for so many years until my w-whole personality was just...mutilated. I shouldn’t have

hidden all this shit from my best friend..."

She choked this watery smile and realized it.

"And...And I shouldn't have pretended that spending New Years with you wasn't the best night of my life or run when you chased me after. I fucking like you. I like being around you and maybe there are more reasons as to why I want to stop running and hiding and bottling. But, what I was trying to say before the bile hit, those reasons didn't matter until I got close to you, Billy, and I don't care so-"

Billy hushed Evie with one finger to plush lips. Silenced her completely when two hands cupped her jaw. Pulled her forth so his mouth could press coolly into her brow.

"So, you wanna go out? Again?" *And again. And again.* He held her level. Brown eyes flickered and she nodded. "Gonna ask you when you're sober too."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart," he tilted, "hope to die."

"Do you?"

"Not at the moment." Moonlight kissed him. Made him ethereal. Evie's brow softened, ocean waves and glitter washing a gentler expression across her face.

Billy edged in and she winced back.

"I just puked so much, I don't taste great."

"I have mints in the car." Billy curled a smile. "Poor thing. Burden of the Keg King."

"Ah, about that..."

"No, I think the crown will look better on you. Fucking hate all the requirements with it. Not my scene." Billy made a thing of it to drop to one knee. "Your highness." Sly eyes caught the twinkling stars.

Glowing bright blue before he brought her hand up to kiss her wrist. They locked in there. Knowing in a crowd of untold numbers that they'd still find the other.

Billy rose and eased one arm behind her back. Offered his free open palm.

"Are you okay?"

In a dream, she grasped his hand and went with him.

"I am now."

Cool air echoed that hard pound of music in the distance. Lights flashing behind glass windows. He helped her stumble into the car and buckled her in. Smacked the glove box open.

"Take your pick. Mouthwash. Mints. I have it all." The door shut so he crossed around to join.

"Mouthwash?" Evie fought with the lid until he snagged it from her to remove.

"Spent a lot of nights in here." He watched her take one swig and swish it around. Rolling the window down to spit. Evie popped at least four mints into her mouth after so he turned the car on. Air blowing as she brought the window up. "Better?"

"Much." She heaved, eyes sliding to him. "Ugh."

"What?" He laughed and picked out a tape. In no rush.

"I get so mad at you and I still want to give you a blow job."

"Hm. I'll remember that. Maybe when you're sober." Billy sat back to peer at her. Flushed and too intoxicated. "I'm not gonna need you drunk to pour your little heart out, am I?"

"No, but it never hurts." Evie was pulling the mirror down. "Oh, god. Look at me."

"Prettiest King I know."

“No, I look like a monster who ate Christmas.” She groaned. “They held my skirt up, right?”

“Yeah, actually. I definitely didn’t get the slightest flash of lacy red panties.”

“Good,” Evie sighed and only then processed, “wait-”

“Kidding.” Billy pulled out to weave through parked cars. “I only saw your panties just now when you upchucked into that bush. I like the fishnets, by the way.”

He made it a point to settle a palm on her knee. One finger flicked at the mesh.

“Carol’s idea.” Evie gave another little moan. “I can’t remember the las’ time I was this drunk.”

“Hey, no sleeping.” Billy reached up to pinch her cheek as he leaned out to see the dark road. “Fucking hick town. Can’t even light all the damn streets.”

“Wanna blow you.” Evie hovered into him. Fingers curling at his leather jacket.

“So you can puke in my lap too? Been there, sweetheart, and I learned my drunk lesson. Sit up.” He nudged her back into the seat as she cackled.

“You still mad at me?” She reached to pat his arm and missed. Billy was silent for a moment.

“You’re a hard girl to stay mad at.” Came the most truthful answer he could find. “Gonna hold you to the blow job later though.”

“M’kay.” Evie’s head lulled toward the window.

“Is your mom home?”

“She doesn’t want to be home with me anymore. Ever since the divorce...just leaves notes and money on the fridge. Goes out with her little party friends. Sleeps with some guys. We eat together less. Least

she doesn't bring many home. The guys. Her taste is so...sooooo horrible." Evie rolled her eyes and played with the theatrics. "She doesn't wanna talk to me or see me, I just remind her of everything that went wrong in her life."

"Evie, shut up. Don't do that to yourself right now."

"You shut up." She blindly found his arm. Tried to breathe while her head spun and spun. "It's true. She can't stomach me right now. Even if I pretend I'm all fine and dandy. It doesn't matter."

Teeth flashed when Billy eyed her pitiful expression. Didn't reach her eyes. Evie seemed to chill and recalibrate.

"Have you ever had a girlfriend? Or a boyfriend?" The tone changed. Got smaller. Billy stared at the road.

"No. I wouldn't say anything I've had comes close to us."

Us. He said it so confidently like there already was an *us*.

"Did you want one?" She hitched and tried not to sound eager.

"Why do we need the whole label attached, huh?" Came a shrug. "Can't I just promise I won't fuck anyone else and carry your books?"

"I can carry my own books, thank you very much. I'm am...woman. I am she." Evie slurred. Swayed to watch the dark trees. Felt like they were all slow dancing in the moonlight. "I don't know, I guess I want...some kind of public confirmation. Would you kiss me whenever still?"

"Whenever the hell you wanted." Lips lifted at that. Billy spied her. "With tongue."

"What if I want to hold your hand? Something far sweeter than those ob...obscene kisses we share." Evie's head tipped to his shoulder again. Almost shy.

"Sharing a chocolate milkshake ain't sweet enough for you?" A laugh erupted. Soft and gentle before he shook his head. "I'll let you hold my hand, but I get free reign of your hips, waist, and ass."

Unlimited tit access in private.”

“*Sheesh*, already making demands... Here. Fingers laced. It’s better.” Evie took his hand. Turned it over to weave their digits experimentally.

“I can manage that.” Billy paused, exhaling. “I might get snappy. Might not answer all your feelings questions the way you want. Might not even tell you everything I’m thinking. About myself and my home. I’ll be honest about us though.”

“I hope you try. Whatever you feel... I hope you can understand why I ask about you if anything.” Evie paused. “I hold back too. I’ll try to do it less. I’d like to be someone you come to when you need a person. We don’t have to label this yet. I just...I just wanna know I’m your person, I guess.” She looked at their clasped hands.

“Okay.” He blinked. “We’ll start there...once you’re sober.”

“*Mmm*, where we going?” Evie pressed back into the door, still gripping his hand.

“Gonna get you cleaned up and make sure you don’t choke on your puke, Keg King.”

“So romantic.” Evie tipped her head back before a hand cupped her jaw to steady her again. Billy parked next to the curb and got out while she wobbled, managing to undo the seat belt.

“Alright, chica, let’s go.” He got the door open. “Think I won’t lift you out of here?”

“M’legs are jelly.” Came the slurring. She fussed about brushing curls from her face. “You’re not strong enough to carry me.”

“That so, smartass?” Billy’s nostrils flared before leaning in. One swoop heaved her from the car. “Quiet, Evie. Hush...” He hissed as she squealed and wiggled. Grasping for him. “Little shit.”

He kicked the door shut and strained but carried her up toward the Fenny house.

“Feel your muscles all bulging.” She cooed into his neck. “I like it.” Billy’s knees got weaker at the mere touch of her lips on his flesh. He set Evie on her feet and snatched the keys from her hand as she fished them out. They jerked the door open and stumbled together. She tripped going in. Fell back into him.

“Let’s go, drunk. Bathroom. You definitely have more puke in you.”

“Liar, liar...pants on...*ngh*.” Evie heaved as the white light blasted her eyes. Scrambled to the toilet and hurled. “I’m dying.”

“No shit, kid.” Billy shrugged his jacket off and went into her room, listening to the distant moaning into the porcelain throne. He startled Blue on the bed who rasped at him. “Your mom’s a mess.” The kitten climbed up to inspect and nuzzle his discarded coat. Billy removed his outer shirt and returned to Evie in a tank. Turned the bath on and felt the warming water. “C’mere, let’s wash your face and mouth out. Leaving your mouthwash here next to you. Drink up.”

“I can’t swim,” Evie mumbled over the toilet. Head on the seat as her own jacket slipped off.

“Well, I know CPR and I won’t let you drown. Gonna undress you a little. Nothing weird.” Billy paused. Bit his lip. “Not while you’re drunk at least.”

“How are you at maximum horny all the time?” Evie whined against the light while he got her coat off and went for the shirt next. Eyes sliding around Billy’s face while he looked at her body.

“Says the girl mad at me and still begging to suck me off.” The quip made her smirk.

“I am mad at you. I think.” Evie blinked and he stilled there to see her eyes. “Get so mad that you see me.”

“I’m sure.” Billy unhooked her necklace and earrings so they didn’t get tangled into miles of curls. Practically dragged Evie to lean half over the tub in her bra. “C’mom, wash your face.”

Wet fingers flicked water at her. Making Evie dart up to squirm.

“Feel better now.” She mumbled, blubbering under the faucet while she felt about and scrubbed her face clean of sweat and makeup. Cleansing.

“Stay there.” Billy left for a good ten minutes as Evie shimmied out of her skirt and boots. She washed her mouth out several times until it was minty fresh. He phoned Heather to let her know he’d acquired a drunk Fenny. Returning quickly to a stunning sight. “Whoa.”

“Huh?” She’d turned the facet off and was just lying curled with a towel into the bathmat.

“You’re really gonna kill me, Evie.” Billy scanned the outfit. What was left of it. Fishnet tights. Bra and panties. Matching reds. “Sip this. Just some water.” He covered her in a big, fuzzy robe that was hanging up in her room and propped her up for water. Got her to choke a bunch down as she pushed at his chest.

“I may be a Pisces, but I can’t swim well, damn you!”

“I’ll teach you this spring if it warms early.” Billy set the glass aside and tied her robe. Double knotted it. “Don’t understand how the seasons work out here.”

“Heather has tried many times, I’m a stage five wall-clinger.” Evie wavered there, poking his chest. “Would you take me to Lover’s Lake?”

“Yeah, bathing suits are optional.” He sat next to the tub with her. Offered the glass again so she could sip the rest. Evie hitched to chuckle at the thought.

“I want a big blanket to lay on. And a box of tangerines to share. All the cheap fruit we can buy.” Evie’s lips were lifting as she lulled to see him. Batting those lashes too obscene and sparkly.

“It’s a date.” Billy shrugged. “Gonna need some practice dates until then and you’re gonna be hungover tomorrow. Mona will be out cause it’s the weekend and she has a pattern. So, I figure we hit the couch cause we’re broke and I nurse you back to health.”

“You’re so transparent, Hargrove. You totally wanna spoon me or

something, pervert.”

"Or something." He agreed, licking his bottom lip.

Evie gave this puff and fell against him. Immediately got shaken to life.

"No, no. You are not sleeping on the floor. Up we go. Already proved I can carry you."

"Yeah, yeah. I watched you exercise in that open garage enough during the fall. Keep lifting, Billy." Evie became a total ragdoll as he brought her up. They paused when it donned on him.

"So you did watch me while you rode around on your bike or little roller skates, how bout that?" Billy draped her arm over his shoulder and got her stumbling toward out. "I knew it. You're transparent also, Angel." Evie's cheeks were already a spectacular rosy shade so she peered away to spare herself more embarrassment. Blue watched them from Billy's coat as they got into the bedroom.

Evie's upper half flopped into the mattress with a whine.

"Legs too, Fenny." Billy had to roll her over. "Christ, you're being difficult." He fought to untangle her, bring the covers up. Blue chirped and climbed up the back of his jeans to get into the bed as well. "You, too." Evie started to mumble something incoherently into the pillows, wiggling to get comfy.

"Billy," Evie finally managed to grasp at his wrist, blinking, "m'sorry."

"You're apologizing to me? The fucking asshole prick?"

"Something came over me tonight. I feel bad, cause I felt sick and a part of me loved it." She pulled for him, eyes pleading. "I stole the moon and the stars and I didn't care about anything else."

"I'm sure the thrill of that felt amazing." He replied steadier. "You earned the moon."

Evie didn't know how to explain it. How to convey that the world

let her down and she was going to rule it anyway. How she'd destroy it if it didn't let her. Call it passion or need or spite. Good or evil. Photographers flashed in her brain. Whisking pieces of her soul away with each pulse. This battle would ravage and rage on behind her eyes. She swallowed that all down. Let it bloom quietly inside her to wreak havoc another day down the line.

"I just...what I've been," she hiccuped, "trying to say this whole time is I do wanna be a girlfriend and I want to stop running. Maybe your girlfriend and I never really asked if you did girlfriends 'cause I was too scared. Don't really care about labels, I just want...I don't know, like I said, something tangible. And I messed it all up and I'm so drunk-"

"What do you want right this second, Evangeline?" Billy had a fierce tenderness about that.

Pink lips parted to exhale a wish. Eyes holding.

"Kiss me."

Billy curved to grant it, nudging Evie on her side.

"Wanna trust me to ask you tomorrow? This thing we have. Call it what you want." Blue eyes searched Evie. Saw her clear as day. "It's me and it's you, Evie. It's us."

"It's real." She cradled his jaw to agree, thumb drawing a line across the angle of flesh. Sounding hopeful. Billy reached up for her hand, growing near again to touch his lips to her ear.

"Go to sleep now." He scooped up Blue there to let the cat nestle above her. Sat close until she faded away. In the quiet, Billy undressed and reclined next to her. Listened to the breathing even out. Wondered what color stardust sprinkled over her dreams and what shapes they took.

Nestling himself against her back, Billy figured he could try something tangible while the words still evaded him. Being there to enjoy the morning with Evie sounded like a start. He watched her fall away from him. Even breaths rising and falling in careful rhythm.

"This is Evangeline," Billy uttered for practice, unable to give the words to mortal souls, "my...girlfriend." Feeling almost childish, he adjusted on his back. An arm behind his head. Lip twitching up.

"This is Evie." He smiled that time. Let himself wish and dream the night away. "My girl." The syllables whirled around his tongue. Met the air in greeting. One hand touched his chest. Blue eyes peered to see her still dead asleep before he hushed again. "My girl."

Maybe it would take eons for him to articulate these sentiments before prying eyes. But, damn did the song of it lift his heart so high, he had to look down to see heaven. Just what she wanted. Just as she dreamed from the first. Something tangible.

Billy saw her for all that she was. All that she could be. And Evie held this power all on her own. This entire span of time, maybe she didn't know that. Hurt and vanity and fire and facades and demons aside. The raw beat of her heart didn't need any of these empty lights to charge it.

The great song she coveted to find. The sun and moon and stars, it was already her. Already alive there. She was the song. Stripped away and still an electric neon pulse. Billy turned to face Evie, fingers tracing her exposed wrist while she curled on her side to breathe against him. Twitching, she nuzzled forth into the pillows, sighing out. Dreaming. Hopefully something lovely tonight.

There were fragments and words Billy wasn't able to share yet. More than he liked to admit. Things Evie would tease out of him in lingering moments they touched together. An easier sentiment repeated over and over because he knew it was enough. Billy knew he was enough for Evie this hour.

"I see you," he murmured there to keep giving life-everlasting to budding petals. Billy closed his eyes. Willed himself to join her in whatever dreams may come. Confessing in the hopes that Evie would see what he did. Maybe someday.

"I see you."

Notes for the Chapter:

Biggest thank you to everyone reading again!!!! Hope you liked this one after my break. Happy Halloween! Comments and kudos mean so much to me. Please chat with me below if you have the time or on my Tumblr, [Alias-B.tumblr.com](https://alias-b.tumblr.com) xoxo

19. One Caress

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone!! I know it's been quieter around here, but enjoy the chapter. Billy nurses a hungover Evie back to life as they reach a common ground with their relationship. Evie returns to school as the new Keg King. Chp title is after that Depeche Mode song. TW: Light light mention of a past r*pe/abuse & Pica. Smut!!

Death. Hot, swampy death. Somehow mixed with frigid chills.

Evie cracked her eyes to light and moaned. Loud enough to wake the body spread on his back next to her. Billy spied her. Curls spiraling endless directions. Knotted all over.

Face pressed into the pillows, Evie held her thudding brain. Figured it might be unspooling around a cracked skull. There was movement as Billy reached over her to pull the curtains further closed and block the early morning sun.

“You seriously woke up at seven with that bad a hangover. Figured you’d sleep in longer. Must be a pride thing.” Billy hummed and draped his arm over her. Casual as can be to tuck back in. He made this rumbling sound into her shoulder blade and sighed out.

Evie realized finally she wasn’t alone and scrambled up, almost tumbling over the bottom edge of the bed if Billy hadn't snatched her wrist.

“Easy!” Came the sharp hiss. “Take a moment to remember last night if you can.” Brown eyes squinted to blink at him. Blurring the gold honey of him together. Billy made a face. “Jesus, you’re looking at me like I’m taking a dump here, Evangeline.”

“Oh, jeez,” Evie fisted her curls so he let go. Her eyes began to dart, finding the events and piecing them. Little by little. *“Jesus Dolly Parton Christ.”*

"That's some poetry I like." Billy reclined, covered in a loose sheet looking his insufferable cupid self. One hand behind his head while he tapped a rhythm into his abs. Evie moaned again, curling up toward the curtains.

"I did a keg stand..."

"Oh, yeah, you did." Blue eyes rolled. "Your highness."

"Did I puke on anyone?"

"Just some sorry ass purple primroses." He'd snarked with some amusement. "You almost got me, but I aimed you just fine."

"Shit. I'm-"

"You're gonna piss me off if you apologize again. That's a stupid girl habit you need to shake."

"Stupid *girl* habit, *pfffs*. I'm Billy Hargrove. I'm perfect and glowy with the face of a damn cherub. Know-it-all." Evie huffed and mumbled to mock him but Billy continued.

"You just did to me what I did to Harrington. Figure I had it coming. I'm still Billy-The Shit-Hargrove. Smoke and mirrors as you think." His chest rose and air blew out his mouth. "We didn't do anything, I just helped you home as you poured your tasty heart out."

"Yeah, uh... It's all coming back. *Argh...*" Evie rubbed her face and aimlessly waved for him to stop talking. She noticed Billy still had his jeans on, no shirt. Then, spied her own outfit under the robe. "The hell are we wearing?"

"You were keen to flash me those Fenny wiles so I tied you into the drunk girl straitjacket. Took some wrangling, but I think I earned the gold," he blinked, "and I didn't wear anything under the denim. I figured jeans were better than you waking to my *huge, raw* morning wood...unless you're into that."

He winked which earned him that scrunchy scowl he loved to see on her face.

Evie collapsed back on her front. Cursing daylight. Lingered black makeup still smeared around her eyes.

“Okay, well, I can die now. Officially. Thank you, Billy, for bearing witness.”

“No, no, I’m nursing you back to health today. We both smell like party. Get up. Water. Pills. Shower. Gonna shower at my place and then I’m coming back for breakfast. I’ll make your birthday up to you if you’ll let me. Hope you let me, cause I’ll bug you another two months until you don’t.” Fingers tugged for messy curls until she grumbled.

Evie poked those bright eyes up.

“There was talk of a couch day. I remember.”

“You remember everything?” Thick lashes batted the vulnerability away. She softened.

“Everything. Feel like death,” she said, “but waking up in your arms wasn’t so bad.” Billy brightened, liking that. Maybe too much because he looked smug. “So, the couch. You and me. Us. Can you manage that? Relaxing with casual stimulation.”

“Oh, say stimulation again. Slower,” Billy uttered and Evie rolled her eyes. “Gonna let me come back over?”

“Maybe.” She hitched and whined, ruffling her curls. “Knowing my mom, she’s gonna stay until closing. Around six or seven tonight, she might go party straight from the shop. She’s made that a habit on weekends. I don’t know, as this year is going she’s just home less. City friends. Dating. And I feel bad cause it’s almost easier.”

Billy didn’t comment.

“My throat still hurts from last night and we do smell pretty ripe...gonna shower. Clean these sheets too.”

“We haven’t even made a proper mess of them.” Billy came up on his elbows with a suggestive look. They shared another beat before his tone changed. “I should have stayed.”

"I wish you did. But, I also wish I didn't run into Fredrick's arms after that dance. It was stupid. We can both make idiot decisions. Still young, I guess." Evie turned her eyes. "But, you're here now and we're not yelling at each other."

"It's a whole new world. Keg King."

"I need to forget that."

"School won't. None of the schools there will forget it. Betcha even Tannen knows." Billy pushed up and Evie followed, stretching until something cracked delightfully. "Heard from him?"

"Something with a DUI or two... I don't know. He made his threats already." She stopped to pet Blue, shifting the kitten off Billy's coat while he snagged his shirt. "Tell Max I said hi if she's around."

"Give me thirty." Billy took his coat, gave her ass a pat, and waltzed out. Unworried. Evie dragged into the shower. Stood there under the warm spray with her head pressed against the cool tiles. Swallowed some aspirin down and slid her eyes to the container of cherry red pins.

There wasn't a melancholy welling inside her empty gut, but she found it odd. This craving to indulge. To swallow sharp objects and let them click around musically inside her. Make them part of her routine. Eat artificial things until she was made from them. A doll on the top shelf threatening to take a tumble.

Wet curls hung over her shoulders and breasts. Evie closed the mirror and looked at her body there. Head tilting. Towels fell around her feet. She opened her palms, arms slightly lifting in a submissive motion. Evie thought to cover herself but didn't. Imagined a shell opening so the world could look at her. Admire her. Pluck her free and decorate her with tiny diamonds and opals. Maybe seaweed and shells like a pretty siren.

The mirror lights washed her flesh out as they would an old starlet. *Flash*. Romancing Evie as she blew kisses to an empty lens, hoping to be loved beyond it. She might die if they don't all love her. Want to screw her. Want to open her up and peek inside. *Flash*. Keep her at

arm's reach if they don't like what they see. *Flash*. It doesn't matter because she's still a wondrous thing to covet.

She imagined several hands piecing her parts together. Painting them with deft brushes. Evie could sit on a shelf still. She could also let them loop red strings around her broken limbs. Contorting fingers walking her upon a empty stage with the same washed-out lights. Evie would be anything for them. Give anything for eyes and lights and brushes that caress her.

Hands pushed her curls back over her shoulders. Evie really looked at her body. No shame. No sex. No fear. No disgust. Just flesh and blood and muscle wrapped around bones with marrow made of that electric stardust. Flesh that offended the world, they had to fetishize her to stand her. Nothing really mattered if the lights washed her away though. The lights would tell them to love her regardless because she was the next great thing.

Flash.

Lips pushed into the mirror's reflection, breath ghosting to leave an imprint that faded as she leaned back. Her neon demon flitting out to curl and poison the world so she wouldn't have to choke it down alone.

"I don't want to be them," Evie sneered there, "they'll want to be me."

They'll claw. And scrape. And scream. And die. Just to be a second rate version of *Evangeline*. Steam rose around her, placed adoring kisses upon her skin.

A kiss and a promise wrapped in that vengeful neon demon she fed and hid from the world that had ruined her. Broke her parts to pick and choose the best. A demon she still kissed and tried to preen with kindness because *Evangeline* tried. She tried.

Evie hadn't been cruel. She told lies. She made messes. But, she tried and she had always hoped that would count for something. It didn't with her father. Or Mona. Not even Fredrick, he liked her mutilated. But, Evie tried to hold onto that kind girl with fire and

hopes to create music that rained to make flowers grow even bolder. She deserves something. Anything.

She was already carved out by this life. Felt like she might hit bone if she dug any further. Piles and piles of ash spilling out longing veins. Organs delectable enough to feed on from souls that sapped her vitality away. What else was there to do but scream until someone heard her? Scream for the girl she lost. The people who would never care to understand that. Scream until they were forced to scream over her. Until they were all roses falling at her feet.

As she looked at herself here, Evie wondered if that girl was even alive anymore. And if she'd already let her down. If she could be forgiven. If she could forget a specific howl of thunder that came after crackling lightning. Lips near her ear to preen so sweet.

"My little mouse-"

Flash.

Hands shaking, she thrust the mirror open and pricked her finger on a cherry pin. Blood beading before she settled it upon her tongue to devour it.

It didn't make sense. She was happier. Today, she was better. She was in control. But, this... It was built into her. Settling comfortable with everything else. A need. A hope. A cycle. An addiction. Girlhood was a horror story written by a true romantic. This, she knew well.

Just once, Evie figured. She could wean off it. She could gather her parts and sew them back together without help. Carve the person she lost to the world in something stronger.

It's fine. This is fine.

Flash.

Unable to see whoever was in the mirror now, Evie shut the lights out and hurried away. She pulled a long sleeve tee on with a faded floral design. Decided leggings were a god-like invention and was stuffing socks on when Billy let himself back in.

At the sound, she clenched her stomach as if he'd walk in and see the artificial fragments that made her up now. A softer breath puffed. Everything was neatly hidden inside. Soon to be a part of her shelf collection. Footsteps came to her while she bent over to toss her wet towels in the hamper.

"Can't knock-?" Evie was spun around into an oncoming hard kiss. Lips colliding before Billy hitched and pulled out. Fireworks burst.

"Hey, I waited for that." He winked and went into the kitchen. Owned the space. "You look like hell still, Evie. Couch. I'll make you something greasy to eat."

"Ugh, I won't even fight you on this...and you're well aware of that." Evie fell onto the sofa. Sagged. Heard Billy clicking around. "You're not gonna make a mess, are you?"

"Quit worrying, let the master work." He peered at the kitten eagerly eating from her dish.

Evie heard something sizzle and flipped TV channels. Turned the brightness and volume a little lower while she draped over the sofa's arm. Tried to distract herself as the meds kicked in. Melting around her pricking pin. Billy padded back in with a paper plate. Something stacked high on it.

"What did you...?" Evie blinked and sat up to make room for him so he put the plate down. Still warm and steamy, gooey cheese oozed from fresh bread. "Grilled cheese. Oh hell, that actually looks really good."

"I made a bunch. Stuff that hangover." He spied her and stole the remote. Evie was too busy leaning over to pull a cheesy sandwich apart to fight him. Readily, leaning into Billy's shoulder, Evie got comfortable there as they shared a silence. A hot, greasy meal that was perfection. Even a few laughs over the TV.

She forgot about pretty made up dolls. About that girl she lost. About whatever was trying to take its place. About screaming and thunder.

"I think we should set some ground rules for this thing since we're obviously avoiding labels," Evie said during a commercial, wiping her fingers on a napkin before she pushed up. "Water?"

"With ice if you really wanna impress me." Billy kicked back and heard her scoff. "What do you mean, rules?"

"I mean," the sink started running from the kitchen, "just...you wanna be with me and I wanna be with you and we're not gonna bring a third party into that. Basic 'don't screw this up' rules."

"Unless you're into it." Billy cracked his cheekiest smile as she returned. Ice clicked in two glasses. Billy put one arm up on the couch to gesture so she tucked in there. Cups clicked and they hydrated as if a mission was afoot.

"Ah, use the coaster." She leaned forward so they could set the drinks down. Billy rolled his eyes and sat back, legs spreading.

"You worry too much, I know how to tell people I'm seeing a girl."

"How public can we be? If I try to kiss you or, god forbid, hold your hand at school...will you be weird about it now?"

"No, and just give me a slap if I get weird on you again." He shrugged. "If I wanna slip you my tongue or smack your ass, are you gonna get all squirrely on me?" Billy tipped his head back when he felt her chuckle.

"Depends on who you do it in front of. I figure you'll use your brains for that judgment. I hope." Came the softer reply. Evie curled into the warmth of him. Stared at his neck and watched the muscles and veins shift under tanned skin. Wondered about sinking her teeth there. "You can get handsy within reason. Do that thing where one person slips their hand into the other's pocket as they walk."

"I'll give you the John Hughes fantasy if you throw me a little pornstar now and then."

"Bet you think every nasty thing you say makes me blush."

Evie wiggled down and settled her head in his lap. Eyes snapped

down to see her face crinkle with a brighter smile, still only somewhat fatigued from the night before. Curl spiraling long over her shoulders and his thighs. He caught one around his finger. Twirled it with a thoughtful expression before he looked at her eyes.

“You are beautiful, Evangeline Fenny.” Billy had to sigh it. A fierce and tender proclamation. A stunning spell cast over her like a thin veil. Twinkling jewels. Flash photography.

It became clear that they held power over each other and that this was the closest she’d ever gotten to her name in lights.

And Evie did blush. She didn’t look away from his eyes. For once. Not when they flickered to catch her gaze. Lost in Billy, she rose and turned over on her hands and knees. Leaned toward him carefully. Billy inhaled her perfume, got this fluttered look as she took his chin and tipped it to place a delicate kiss upon his throat. Another touched the line of his jaw.

One muffled sound fused them together. Evie’s back hit the couch. The remote fell with a clatter. Fingers laced, Billy shifted her hand next to her head. Saw her pause to kiss his knuckles. Tough with scars from too many fights that burst them open.

Fingertips gave this gentle caress of Evie’s hairline with his free hand. Careful as if something here could shatter. Thick lashes fluttered so she turned to look up at him there. Words crushed in her throat. Almost pleausrably.

“Open your mouth.” Billy longed to taste the fragmented syllables. Lips parted. A finger swept the kiss-puffed swell of them. “Little wider.” His own mouth curled. Thumb rubbing a circle into her chin before he came down. A vaguely sweet-salty kiss. Tangy, almost reminding him of that balmy California air.

Evie matched him. Pushed back. Cupped his face. Made a heavenly sound that vibrated into him.

And she leaned out as if struck by lightning.

“What’s your middle name?”

“What?” He laughed, watching her lashes flutter. Hand midway to touch her breast.

“Your middle name.” Evie fingered the metal pendant when it hung down from his neck. Traced a line across his collar before tucking spun gold behind his ear.

“Why?”

“So suspicious.” She tugged his tee so he’d kiss her again. Slower this time. “This, Billy, is totally a date. So, I’m asking about you about you.” Frankly, Evie wanted to know every little, silly thing there was to him.

“Feels like that perfect, lengthy ending of a date to me.” The snark had Evie pouting. Stopping anymore kisses he dared to plant. Billy gave pause. “It’s stupid. My middle name.”

“Well, now you have to tell me.” She shifted so he could drape his weight across her, one elbow planted near her head. Billy rolled his eyes. Cringed.

“Seamus.” He mumbled, sparking. “Don’t laugh. Mom chose it after an ancestor on her side.”

“Just smiling cause you told me. That’s not bad!” Evie pressed her lips when they trembled. “William Seamus Hargrove.”

“Yeah, I sound like a creepy lighthouse keeper who’s really into masturbating.”

“One out of two.” Evie squealed as he pinched her side for that. “Marie!”

“Huh?”

“My middle name. Marie.” Arms looped loosely around Billy’s shoulders. They wrapped each other up, spoke intimately of casual subjects. All too easily.

“Evangeline Marie Fenny.” He gave it a taste. Liked it.

“Uh-huh.” Evie’s fingers twirled idle into Billy’s curls, massaging circles into the back of his warm neck. “My mom got the middle name from this famous Voodoo Queen in New Orleans. She thought to name me Christine, Wendy, or Beatrice but when I was born, she changed her mind at the last minute because she saw me and said the name just came to her from this epic poem. Said it was star-worthy so she plucked it down from the night sky and kept it as her own.”

“A star?” He panned to focus on her expression relaxing.

“It’s a lot to live up to.” Something to grieve deeply in that.

“Hm. Voodoo Queen. So, do you like to turn boys into creatures when they cross you? Frogs, goats, and bats maybe? For sacrifice?”

“I mean, that’s the first thing they teach us, *obviously*. Voodoo is actually peaceful and balanced, it just has a violent misconception because of racism. It’s an even exchange of life and energy. A relationship you build with actual effort. Signature.”

“My mom might have liked it, she was spiritual-like.”

“My aunts know more. They were pretty worked up when my mom branched out. I like to think she balances a couple religions to get by. She does the same thing with hair styling...and boyfriends.” Evie puffed, eyes elsewhere. “Just a jukebox, she changes the song by whatever is gonna comfort her most that week. I just tell people she’s open-minded and she is.”

“My dad hates your mom more than he’s hated any neighbor we’ve ever had. And we used to live across from these guys he didn’t like me talking to. Said they were living in sin. Well...he used worse words.” Billy admitted, vaguely entertained because Neil loved to spit words only when backs were turned. He was a coward. “They were always nice to me. Owned this fancy cake shop so they sometimes gave me a truffle if I was playing on the apartment steps.”

“I can picture you small. Face all messy with chocolate.” Evie gushed there. “Probably the cutest thing. Bet Neil hated them more for being sweet.”

“The one and only time he spat the word out in the open, one of those guys broke his nose. I got the brunt of that anger later, but it was worth it. Just makes me like Mona more.”

“I’m sure.” Evie blinked, sighing elsewhere under Billy’s gaze. “My mom and I have a disconnect, but I am proud of her. She’s so educated despite having me young even if people don’t know it. She’s marched for human rights and she’s braver than she knows. She always stands for something and I hope I can one day too. Even if her big, noble causes distract from her home life.”

Evie paused with this searching look. Unsure if she should indulge the thought that swept her eyes. Gently, she continued.

“I don’t think her mom ever loved her. Nana was always so cold to her, not like with the older sisters. I noticed that young. She might have liked me only cause I was her one and only grand-baby.”

“Why’s that?”

Evie flickered her brown eyes again, frowning.

“You can’t repeat this, not even to me.” A sigh followed when Billy nodded. “When my mom and dad got divorced...that Christmas break she took me back to *N’awlins*. They live in this big place, I used to think it was a castle. Her three older sisters, growing old together. Nana was with them until she passed away. I used to hang out in the attic when I wasn’t at their store. Going through boxes of memories.”

“Yeah.” Billy nodded for her to go on.

“My mom wasn’t supposed to be born. Nana had her sisters. She had this husband. Perfect life. A shop to pass down. One night, she was closing and a man attacked her. Held her down and...” Evie swallowed.

“Oh...”

“He hurt my Nana bad. I don’t think she was ever the same, how can you be? But, she got pregnant with his baby. Kept it and that was my mom. I think my mom spent her whole life trying to make up for it. I’m sure she knew.”

“How so?”

“My grandfather left not long after she was born and..my Nana wrote him this letter I don’t think she ever sent. It was begging him to just take Mona and love her right. It was full of apologies and, I think she was gonna kill herself. I don’t know what changed her mind. But, I found that letter and read it. It was in my mom’s things. Under the floorboards of the first dollhouse she ever made herself. She must have found it all the same. Maybe when she was my age.”

“Probably wasn’t an easy thing to find for her.”

“Right. Might explain why mom can only handle the dainty things in life. She just wanted to be loved. So, I think after that...I tried even harder to be perfect for her. I know she loves me and her mother never loved or wanted her. She tried so hard for everyone even if she’s bad with the negative. We’re friends. She always tells me I saved her life so I’m scared of letting her down. What if I can’t save her one day?” Her voice cracked so Evie swallowed a lump down to level herself.

Billy felt that prick his heart. Deeper than he liked. But, the advice still came out clear.

“That’s not your job, Evie, you need a mother. You have plenty of best friends.”

“I thought she married my dad cause she loved him, but really I think she married the first person who promised to care for her. Who whisked her away from her mother’s cold house. It worked out that he was always traveling for work. It feels like everything I thought I knew about my life wasn’t real.” Evie caught herself, eyes on Billy’s pendant. She hoped it protected him. Well enough. “But, my dad. I bet he thinks about me every day. I know it.”

It was always striking and peculiar how Evangeline spoke of her father. Billy pictured a string being pulled from her back to rattle the same peppy sayings. Over and over again until perhaps she believed it too.

Evie paused to stare at Billy thoughtfully. With the pull of her

string, she switched modes to become something else.

“What kinds of things to do you like to write about?” She asked with this dreamy sort of expression crossing as if the words before were all imaginary. She was fine. Her mother was fine. Her father, he...

It was all fine. Picture perfect. Paparazzi flashing to send her into a sea of spots. Memories wiping.

“I don’t know, anything to not be here.” Billy caught himself, both of them still wrapped around each other. “Not *here*, I mean. I’m here.”

Billy seemed to realize how present he was and shifted off her.

“The words almost don’t sound real.” Repetition. A mild chuckle. “I’m here.” He sounded them out carefully. Evie pulled up. Stared at Billy sitting on his knees between her legs.

“That’s it.” She said. “Labels and rules aside. As long as we’re just *here*, I think we have a handle on this. I can manage that, can you?”

I’m here, Billy gave this closer look and nodded. Earring dangling. Fingers twisted his ring around.

“Are you going to tell Neil or Susan about this?” Evie’s question made him pale noticeably.

“Hell, no. It’s better if my dad doesn’t figure it out. Don’t like him talking to you.”

Evie didn’t argue with that.

“I don’t think I want to tell my mom, she’s just a lot when I’m seeing someone or liking anyone point-blank.” Evie winced.

“Don’t freak on me if I pull from you around my dad. I don’t trust him near you. He’ll say shit and you don’t need that.” Billy peered aside until Evie took his hand, shaking it almost officially.

“Deal. Screw Neil.”

“Oh,” Billy laughed, “you’re still a funny girl, Evie.” Eager as can be, he cupped the back of her head. Kissed her into the couch. They forgot the dull aches that kept them so grounded. All giggles, she squirmed out to escape him. Left Billy breathless and tugged as she got up. “Wait, where ya going?”

“Um. My room. Duh.”

He lit up and tried to play cool which melted the second he scrambled to scoop her from the floor.

“Ah!” Evie wiggled and clung to him. Feeling his muscles bulge and strain as they always did. Made her heart sing. “We didn’t discuss this!”

“If I can lift it, it’s mine. You spent all last night challenging me, what do you expect?” Billy jostled her which had Evie wrapping her arms tighter around his shoulders. Barely squealing.

“Okay! Don’t drop me!” She squeezed into his arms and balled up. Billy laughed all the way to the bedroom. “I didn’t wash the sheets yet.”

“Even better, let’s make a bigger mess of them.” Billy dropped her playfully into the covers. Pulled his shirt off as Evie sat up. Eyes falling to the hard contours. He relished that she liked to look at him. Fingers wrapped around her wrist, encouraging the cool palm into his skin. Up the deft lines in his stomach. “You can touch, I won’t charge you for it.”

She dropped the awe and pushed from him. Laughing back into the pillows.

“You’re such a pain.” Evie stiffened because Billy dropped down to crawl up her body. Pretense gone. One hand cupped her jaw. Urged it open as fingers stroked the silky cheek. Thumb curving the swell of her parting mouth. Evie kissed the pad and let the digit slip along her tongue.

“You’re so good.” Billy shuddered when he felt her tongue whirl obediently around his thumb. Breathless. Evie reached down to undo

his belt. Sly as can be.

“You’re eager.” She whispered coolly against the wet thumb tracing a line down her chin.

“I haven’t been laid much the past few months, I’m collecting. Times I tried didn’t work. Sue me.”

“Poor thing.” She cooed, working his zipper down until Billy bit his lip. Hips shimmied between her spread legs. He jerked her hips up to get the underwear and leggings off in one expert pull. “Did you think about me when you tried?”

Billy narrowed on her. Sighed as a hand slipped into his jeans. Moaned.

“Yes.” He stole himself a kiss. “Couldn’t even measure up to that kiss in the street.”

“Remind me how that went.” Evie hitched a laugh and he smothered her down. Scared the syllables with his tongue.

Billy pulled her hair for good measure, pushed his open fly into her bare skin. He didn’t waste time this hour as she moaned and pulled for him. Adjusted to find her core. Hips snapped together, both of them mostly clothed in disarray. A good ache built as he moved. Hard and intent like he was making an impression into her flesh. Into her marrow.

Evie would remember him and this time and how he played her. Totally. Neither of them would be running. This moment was about the long haul together. They kept slowing to just look and breathe. Noses nuzzling. Soft exhales in turn. Billy broke kisses to push his face up against her hair and jawline, arms sliding underneath her to cling. He let Evie whisper sweet things into his flesh. Let her hold him just as close.

At the sweetness of her coaxing, he spilled inside her. Earlier than he meant.

“Shit.” Billy started to push up when Evie’s legs caught his hips.

“Stay,” she puffed, “stay like this for a bit.” She prodded and pawed, openly needing him. So very bad.

“I’m crushing you.” He mumbled into her cheek. Trapped in heat.

“I like it.” Evie’s arms looped his shoulders. Both of them got the shakes. “I like how you feel right here.”

“You didn’t come yet.” Hot breath ghosted her neck.

“It’s okay.”

Billy blew air into her jaw. Kissed the line of it before he reached down to finish her.

“Yeah?”

“*Ngh*, yes.” She mewled out silently. “*Oh, Billy.*” That was his favorite song in truth.

“Atta girl.” Billy kept planting kisses. Evie twisted with nowhere to go. Whimpered until she was locking under him. Mouth back open for his slow tongue. She reached a peak and let him slowly bring her back down.

Lips muffled into her collar. He stayed there inside her. Took every piece of comfort she offered. One hand reeled up to pet her curls. Arms kept him firm against her so he could listen to her twittering heart slow and lull. Fingers danced too delicate across flesh.

Evie whined as he pulled out. Felt the absence burn hot.

They messed the sheets. She was still pulling for him until he pushed her over. Wrapped himself around her after fixing his jeans back up. Leaving them open. Evie shifted, restless until Billy kissed behind her ear.

“Just sleep. Not going anywhere.” Billy’s words lulled her back to relax. “Quit squirming about it.”

She stilled, fingers trailing up the hair on his arm before she dropped her head to the offered bicep. Evie tilted Billy’s wrist to see

the watch, groaning.

"It's not even noon."

"Maybe you'll think next time before you get up hungover on a weekday before eight," Billy mumbled into the curls.

"Only did it for the Hargrove grilled cheese." Evie closed her eyes to sigh. "You fell for it."

"Guess we're both screwed."

"*Mm-hm.*" She let her mind flutter. Felt Billy's hand stroking her bare thigh.

Fingers moved up her hip. Kneading the flesh. His palm trailed over her tummy and she didn't stop him. Didn't clam up at a boy touching her fuller areas. Billy worshiped her skin. Breath hot into dark curls. She almost wondered if he was trying for another round massaging her hip like that with dancing fingertips.

"Hard to nap when you...when you touch me." She sounded breathless.

"Like touching you," Billy mumbled. "Gonna figure out a way to prove it to you without the label. This thing."

"For a boy who likes to talk, I notice certain words are hard for you." She felt the arm under her wrapping tighter, pulling her further into his fire. "Not judging. I have problems words too."

"Still good with my mouth." Billy shifted hair from Evie's neck and jaw. Settling his lips there, lazy as can be. "And my hands. But, you still have something nagging you tell you I'm not being truthful about the exclusive thing. Gonna figure out how I can make that up to you."

"If I really didn't trust you, Billy, I wouldn't have let you stay here." Evie shifted around to face him, still laying on his bicep. There was plenty of fear. Fear of exposing her heart and vessels and nerves to be plucked. Fear she'd like him more than he liked her. Fear this relationship would be such an easy thing to fall into.

"That's honest." He decided, lashes batting. Evie reached up and traced this curving line near his mouth.

"Just be with me cause you want to be and try not to raise your voice if you're upset." She dropped her hand. "It's okay if you're upset, you can tell me. It just freaks out when men raise their voices. It's like thunder and I...I'm scared of thunder."

Evie recalled the passive-aggressive way Fredrick would slam things when he was upset with her instead of outright telling her. How he'd wait until she was near tears and begging his forgiveness. Billy studied her eyes. Saw lightning flash within them. Knuckles came to her cheek. Gave an idle caress. His soft lips found her brow and lulled her heavy eyes until they began to flutter. Billy laid there and watched Evie fade, let her sleepy frame tuck into him. Under his chin. She found solace.

He thought of the men in her life and his life who raised their voices. Who hit. Who broke them down to a series of parts they can pick and choose from to make a doll that suited them best. This image they placed up carefully for protection, it may have shattered them both distantly. Billy didn't want to be a piece of thunder in Evie's life. Striking to make his points so she wouldn't forget them.

But, Evie slept so soundly in his arms. Barely twitching while his hands roamed her body. Under the shirt down her bare back. Threading into fluffy locks of thick hair. These little caresses that were her lullaby. It made Billy believe with all his soul that he'd never be like them.

And it made it so easy for him to follow her in darkness.

** ** *

"You're awfully quiet, Max." Evie turned her head in the seat. Trees whizzed by illuminated with little flits of the morning sun.

"Just a test today, I guess." Max had her backpack clutched close in her lap. Almost hiding behind it. She hinted a smile. "I gave Billy shit this morning." Billy snorted in the driver's seat, nodding. One hand idle on Evie's knee. Hot through the denim.

“She did. Neil wasn’t around.”

“Hey...I told Will and them I’d go to the arcade. Just to hang out after school. I’ll be home before dinner.”

“Does Neil know?” Was all Billy asked.

“Yes, he thinks I’m just going to see El. Stays quieter if I’m seeing the Police Chief.” Max plucked up her skateboard. “I won’t need a ride so you guys can make-out.” She snickered while Billy swerved to park at school.

“Yeah? Beat it.” He shifted his seat, patting Evie’s knee to make her wait there. Max jumped out and hopped on her board.

“She does seem off,” Evie remarked more so to herself.

“Things at home are off, it’s making it weird for her and her friends.” Billy shut the door with a hard look. Exhaling out his nose. “It was bound to.” Evie watched Max skate down the hill around other students. Seemingly isolated. She didn’t push the subject and wiped the frown aside. Mauve lips upturned when she peered to see Billy staring at her face. Not reaching for a smoke yet.

“Got something for you.” He said instead, fishing into the front pocket of his denim jacket. “Tried to figure out how to make this official for you. Here.”

Billy dropped a silver chain in her hand without ceremony. The silver ring he wore on his middle finger hung from it. Evie wondered what he’d fidget around with now when he was deep in thought.

“I don’t have a class ring or Letterman jacket for you because I’m not a douche. But, guys do this. Don’t they?” Billy peered at Evie eyeing the ring before she met his gaze.

“It’s perfect.” She turned, gesturing so he could help her put it on. It sat lower than the little music note she usually wore. Evie debated it and pulled her dad’s necklace off, looping it around her wrist as a bracelet because she wasn’t ready to part with it just yet. Maybe it not being in plain sight would make her easier to look at for Mona. “Thank you.”

“My mom got it for me. She had it in the family and said it would fit me one day. That and this chain.” He fingered the saint pendant.

“I’ll be careful with it,” Evie promised him.

“It sits exactly where I wanted it to.” Billy flashed some pride.

“Over my heart?” Her eyes glimmered.

“Over your tits.” He laughed when she shoved at him, tugging his collar in for a kiss.

“You’re gross,” Evie mumbled, pecking him once more. She fingered the ring and beamed.

“You’re into it.” Billy turned her chin for just one more. She could live in this.

Just one more kiss.

Deciding to join the rest of the student body, they got out. Evie slung her strap over one shoulder while Billy held his bag in a wad at his side. They met each other around the car before Billy slipped his arm around her waist, bringing Evie into him. Fingers delved into her back pocket.

Every teen around them took note. It was official. Comments piled in as they passed into school.

“Great party, Evie.”

“Looking good, you two!”

“Love your outfit, Fenny.”

Whistles cast and overlapped suggestively.

“This is weird.” Evie leaned into Billy as they got to her locker. Students looked at them together. Offered winks or smiles. Students who never addressed her much before.

“You’re the keg king. What’s that saying?” Billy had shrugged.

“Heavy is the head... Fine is the ass.”

“I regret you already.” Evie broke to laugh at him. “Pure poetry, Billy.” She shut her locker, paused to see Heather headed her way looking apprehensive. Another smile crossed, even fuller than the last. Heather seemed to respond and follow it.

“So, I heard I missed a piece of history.”

“Hardly, I puked everywhere.” Evie swept curls behind her shoulder. “Billy, can Heather and I have a sec?”

“Depends, am I still an asshole prick?” He leered over Evie’s shoulder.

“You’re back down to normal prick status.” Heather beamed even sweeter while Billy caught his tongue between his teeth, seeming to like that.

“I can work with that, princess.” He tugged Evie’s curls and went around them to head to his locker before the first period. Evie shifted on her feet so they walked along together.

“I know...things have still been kinda weird.”

“I just figured I’d let you and Carol work through your stuff, you know?” Heather looped her arm into Evie’s.

“Can’t without my best friend there. Sure, Carol and I are bonding, but that doesn’t... You and I went to dances together, Heather, we stayed up eating junk food and watching terrible movies. We bought our first bras together.”

“Our mothers made that day so mortifying, I think I’m still messed up from it.” Heather giggled with Evie snorting next to her. “And you got a real B bra while I basically bought a damn bandage.”

“We’re repressing the memory together.” Evie tugged her down the next hallway where Steve scrambled to snatch her into an unexpected bear hug.

“Tell me it’s true, oh my god, Evie.” He was near howling with

laughter. Evie, shocked that Steve lifted her feet from the floor, stammered through the broken train of thought.

“What?” She got spun around with a cry as Heather cackled. Students hurried around them. Steve wasn't strong like Billy, but credit was due.

“You're the keg king?” He shook her by the shoulders. “You smashed Billy's record in front of him. In front of everyone?”

“I'm never drinking again.” Evie dropped her head to his chest, hands covering her face.

“You're my absolute hero, Eves, I hope you know that.” Steve gripped Evie tighter, got close like he thought to kiss her but resisted.

“Yeah, you're going to have to fill us in on everything at lunch.” Heather decided, grasping Evie's hand. “Jesus, Steve, get it together.”

“Let me have this, Holloway. She's mine.” He squeezed Evie's amused frame back into him. “He made my life hellish.”

“I'll dedicate the win to you. How's that?” Evie slipped from Steve, laughing now. “Lunch. We'll give Billy shit about it together.” A wink that Steve matched, thoroughly enjoying this momentous day. Evie rejoined Heather to hurry toward class. “How about a sleepover? Us, Carol, and Max. I think she needs more girls in her life. No boys invited.”

Heather hugged her books close to grin easier.

“I'd like that.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Letting these two finally just be intimate is everything to me. Thank you so so much for reading. Comments and kudos are well loved and appreciated!! Feel free to chat with me below, pretty please or on my tumblr, Alias-B !! xoxo

20. Rose Tint My World

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello everyone. Thanks for clicking in to read. Billy and Evie continue to explore their new relationship together. Max's fourteenth birthday party marks a change for the teens, reminding them that danger isn't too far off.

TW: Neil being Neil. Mentions of abuse. Something close to an almost assault/abduction off screen near the end. Light mentions of Pica & fatphobia. Sexual themes.

“Hold still, I’ll poke your eye again.”

“I can’t breathe, you’re killing me.” Came a sniffled whine.

“Such a baby. You asked.”

“I said I was curious after you put the gunk on my nails!”

“That gunk was a great color on you. You whine just like your big brother.” Carol had Max’s face clamped in her grip as she applied mascara. “Don’t blink, you’ll smear it.”

“Evie, she’s killing me,” Max lamented aloud. “This is not worth it.” Evie just laughed, setting a bowl of pretzels aside. Carol flicked a mirror up to let Max see her handiwork. “Whoa...It’s not terrible.” She gruffed in a mumble, tilting her head to see each angle. “Kinda like Madonna.”

“I’ll take it.” Carol stole some M&Ms from another dish as they shared a spot on Heather’s fuzzy carpet. A movie rolled on in the corner TV.

Max about howled when Heather came in from the bathroom, face covered in green.

“Monster!”

"It's a face-mask!" Heather planted her hands on her hips, prompting more laughter. "You'll be more into them once your body really changes."

"Girls are way scarier than boys." Max poked at her blushed cheek which had Carol smacking her hand away. Evie was draped across the bottom of the bed in her robe and nightie, half-watching the TV. "Can you do a zombie make-up?"

Carol gave a snort.

"I can do anything. kid."

"Eves, you want another piece of pizza?" Heather crossed with the box.

"I'm so full." Evie shook her head.

"You had like one piece."

"I ate a big lunch. And lots of pretzels." Evie snatched the pretzel bowl again for good measure. Truthfully, her appetite had been up and down lately. Mostly down. What with the pangs in her stomach that always passed and... "You sound like my mother."

"She was...extra peppy at the salon today. My mom and I got our monthly trim."

"Probably some guy she's seeing, it'll pass and another will come. Men are like Kleenex to her. Soft, strong, and disposable." Evie shrugged to pluck up a magazine.

"Hey," Max began as Carol fussed over her, "so I didn't want to make a thing of it, but my mom keeps insisting. My birthday party is coming. She and Neil saved so I could have it just at the roller rink and...they said I could invite whoever I wanted. But, I can't ask the guys to come. So I figured I'd ask El. She's really cool. But, maybe if you guys wanted to come? You can bring boys and pretend you're not even at my party if it's not your thing. I just--"

"Max, we'd love to come." Heather piped up first. "Evie and I rule the rink too."

"I look very cute in skates," Carol agreed with a twitching smirk. "I'm in. I'll bring Tommy, he sucks and he'll fall down a bunch. We'll pretend we ran into each other so your stepdad can get the stick out of his ass."

"Billy has to go too cause Neil says it's a family event." Max turned to Evie. "I think he'd be happier with you there."

"I think Billy and I both are fine being there for you. I had my fourteenth at the rink too. It'll be fun." Evie beamed, legs up to sway idly. "Plus we haven't met the Chief's kid. She's home-schooled, right?"

"Yeah, she might be joining us in school next year." Max stayed still for Carol's brush. "Depends. She was uh...adopted under weird circumstances. You'll like her. I taught her how to do that felting thing because of you and she made this funny one of her dad."

"I'll bet Hopper loved that." Evie winked.

"He's kind of a babe in like a scruffy, rugged way," Carol remarked. "Strong mountain man type."

"Ew. He's so old." Max reeled back to laugh.

"I'm just saying! I like a man in uniform. He rocks the khaki."

"The moms in town do eat him up." Heather shrugged, joining Evie on the bed with a handful of candy. "We all have our strange crushes. I like high cheek-bones. Guys with a little Bowie. Evie? You got one?"

"Gia Carangi even if she isn't modeling any more, I love her face." Evie was flicking pages without looking. Howls from the TV went ignored through the chatter.

"I called that. Fenny being into ladies. Try Iman." Carol winked which earned her a look as if she hadn't planted a kiss on Evie in a fit of rage.

"People say Billy's pretty like a girl." Max had added which got the other girls giggling.

"I like this one, we're so keeping her." Carol got up to root for a bag of chips, popping them open. "Like the zombie face better?"

"I still look too pretty." Max appeared more goth than zombie.

"You *are* pretty. Deal with it. We redheads stick together." Carol stole Evie's magazine. "Let us know when the party is, we'll be there."

Max looked at the three older girls squished together on Heather's bed. Chattering and supporting. Happy to have her around.

A bright smile touched her face for the first time since Neil Hargrove walked into her home.

** ** *

Most days, all it felt like was floating. Floating through her house. Through Hawkins. Up and down streets. Through school. A stunning illusion she pulled like wool over her dark eyes.

A woman in rippling silks walking endless halls toward a great, cherry red door at the end, but the door gets farther away and she's thrilled to continue on even still. Feather wings glittering to unfold from her back because heaven's light is beyond the door. Crystalline eyes with their hold. Waiting for her. The sky awaits her with caressing clouds. Opulent gold sun rays and twinkling stars when the world lies down.

Evie knew she was too big for her wings most days. Too heavy to leave the Earth.

Knew in her beating heart of hearts that was the first thing people think when they see her. This magnificent soul with drive and neon and talent reduced to a single shrewd glance. And they don't think twice until she's something vaguely sexual. Something marketable you can package and process and sell to the last drop.

Easier to stomach something uncomely if you can slide into it ruthlessly to rut. They always come like animals, wailing as a banshee would to get off better than they ever will in their small lives. They eat it up. Cover it in sweat and regret and blame.

These things that hang as little weights on her heartstrings swinging back and forth. They make her not want to attempt extending those wings to fly. Fear of heads shaking in judgement. Fear of looking uglier. More foolish for even trying. Poor thing.

All because of one glance that couldn't be bothered to see worth in another human life. Sometimes Evie wanted to be skinny not because of beauty, but because she'd get a privilege pass to exist in this world.

They think she shouldn't dress the way she does. She's probably lazy and self loathing because of added pounds. She has no real aspirations or means to achieve them. Those eyes that watch her eat. That shift away before they decide on another seat because the one open next to her just isn't right. They glare because of the extra room she might take up. Even sharing a few cordial words with fat girls seemed to be a task.

Evie always notices and does the polite thing pretending she doesn't. She knows what her body looks like, no need to point out the obvious.

Strange, how these snap judgements, these eyes that don't look twice; can villainize a body utterly. A body. Flesh, bone, and muscle. We're all made in heaven's image. All destined for paths we seek to control. Superiority should have been an illusion. But no, too much or too little, your worth dips low. Fetishes and internalized hatred for things that were shaped and colored differently. Blame.

But, some days, when the wind soars just right...just strong enough...Evie can spread and illuminate. See the births and deaths of a million stars. Drop the little weights to feel the winds between her fingers. In her curls. In her wings. Feel her feet leave the floor for just a few fleeting seconds.

The fleeting seconds of soaring always seem so worth it against a world of unsightly aches. Against snap judgements she can toss back to live in a flower petal haze.

Evie tried hard to live in those moments when they flashed into her. Spotlights. Butterflies delicately landing on her flesh to open and close their stained glass wings for kisses. Evie felt crushed utterly in

the most decadent way.

Billy's soft lips on her neck to get lost in the pulse. Deft fingers that would push up her clothing as he moved in her. Eyes that wanted to see her. All of her. The prayers he could whisper against heating skin.

A lot could be said about him. But, Billy was always happy to see her and that alone was air spinning into gold. His eyes would light up. Lips twitching. She could hear the single beat that his heart skipped. Even if they didn't speak, they felt this awareness for each other in the vicinity. Truly magic.

Those eyes. That love of a face. Always staring pointedly to read her up and down. Always plucking the weights from her heart by listening. Always unafraid to touch her. Evie hoped she returned that. She really did.

Fleeting seconds began to linger between them. Seeping slow and saccharine as fresh pouring honey.

Sneaking away on walks while he let her hold his hand. Flirtation against school lockers that ended in several 'just one more' kisses. Double dates to the movies with Tommy and Carol. Sitting separately to make out.

Driving up near Lover's Lake to kiss in a parked Camaro while the sun laid itself down to sleep. Fumbling playfully to undress and explore. Watching the construction of a coming mall with Slurpees from the gas station. Tongues and lips colored all artificial cherry and strawberry.

Evie would stretch her wings completely. Let Billy admire them until the world was all satin rose-tinted. She could forget her urges and worries and insecurities. All together. This was fine.

She was fine. More than fine.

He so liked to admire her wings. Pleasure crushed in as she moaned. Let his fingers explore contours and notches untouched before. Billy would take those prayers on his lips and drape them over her body. Spell them between fleshy thighs. Pulling more

fleeting seconds for himself too.

They could roll around under sheets and not worry about anything else. Have conversations that always felt silly and wonderful and weighted because they both mattered to someone so ardently. That alone was an ocean both could sink into.

Something beautiful to behold. The real vision behind the great red door. Your soul mattering.

Evie was in a bubble with Billy Hargrove. A stupid, dopey look on her face when Mona settled dinner down one evening. Steam rising from a huge pot.

"Going out later?" Evie began to create sound or she'd be lost. "You colored your hair brown again."

"Needed another change. Ah, I'm going out just with Karen and Claudia. Dessert and wine night. I asked Susan but that poor thing keeps standing me up. Did you finish Max's gift for her party?" Mona scooped up huge portions in a bowl that Evie would only be prodding at.

"Yeah, it's set. Turned out perfect. She's not much for jewelry but I think a personalized tie dye shirt will be fun. Might look cool while skateboarding. I also have that goody bag of sweets for her to fill up on we made." Evie reminded herself to pick up her spoon. Took a few bites.

"You're not scarfing it down like usual, you love my crawfish soup."

"It's delicious, I just had a big lunch." A lie. Evie pressed herself to eat quicker, tearing a piece of fresh bread to chew. Thing was, she wanted to eat. She wanted to eat so badly despite the sickness welling inside her. The heavy ache made it a task. Mona eyed her daughter there. "My stomach's in knots a lot, just school stuff."

"Well, you are a senior." Mona pushed her own soup around. "I haven't been around as much as I'd like to be. Just the salon and I met-"

"I get it." Evie's lips spread in a flash, not wanting her mother to finish that sentence. "I'm with friends a lot and I keep busy with my music and the cat. I even wrote a new song."

"That's two this week, you. Strumming along blissfully." Mona gushed. "Whatever has you all creative and dewy, chase it." Silverware clicked around and Evie stared at her dish. A broader smile crossed.

"I will."

"What's it called?"

"Ocean Eyes."

Evie could be pretty transparent in the early stages of a relationship.

These short weeks in with Billy. Lyrics flooded free. Sometimes he liked to watch her write and strum when they hung out. Trips to the lounge where she worked other nights got him a full show, but not of her original stuff. Songs marched forth.

"Ocean Eyes."

"Cupid and Psyche."

"Honey Stardust."

"Neon-Tinted Hearts."

Rock. Pop. Lush and obscene with her glowing heartstrings. She wrote them for Fredrick too when they got together.

"Doll Joints."

"Lollipop Lolita."

"Prince Charming."

After dinner, Evie stole a notebook filled with her every sinful lyrical confession of her time with Fredrick Bowers. Burnt it in an

empty pot out back until Billy wandered out the back steps of his place. Asking her if she was trying to set the neighborhood on fire.

“How can I help?” He’d snarked while the sky went all pretty peach fuzz. Evie just laughed and never explained what she’d burnt or why it felt this cathartic to watch the smoke rise toward a falling sun. She figured maybe this was the day she’d stop eating foreign and sharp objects. She could do it. She was happier. Lighter. It had to stop.

It had to. She couldn’t think about this haze shattering, it hurt too deep.

Billy used the flame to light his cigarette comically and kissed her before inhaling the smoke.

“Can we take a drive? Or walk if you’re low on gas?”

“Let’s walk, I got some cash doing my odd jobs for the damn neighbors, but I need it to last a bit longer with Max’s birthday. Got her this new board she was too chickenshit to beg our parents for.”

“Aren’t you a darling big brother?” Evie crossed her arms to follow him when the flame dwindled low. They went around the house to the front, started down the street. “Iris has some hours for me that next Saturday night.”

“You going to tell your mom about the secret job thing?” Billy inhaled and let smoke billow up into the afternoon light. They walked along Cherry Lane. Not touching. Counting steps while their shadows cast and the streetlights came up. A brisk night loomed, spring begging to creep through the month of March.

“I figured I could this summer. Around graduation. Just say I got something bigger since I’m eighteen and Iris can get me steadier hours. Gigs day or night. Maybe I’ll get to host a couple more drag shows. I miss those damn girls, the funniest performers know. I’ll just let my mom down easy about the receptionist thing, hopefully she’s fine with it. Make it sound like I took initiative cause I’m a big girl.”

“And your grand singer plans?” He liked to ask about her and hang upon the syllables.

"Still up in the air. I'm taking the year off to work and write. Try for a talent agent or manager. I can record maybe...try to get airtime. There's this contest thing, they do it every year and the winners always do well. But, I'm honestly too afraid to ask my mom about it just yet. I'm saving though here and there." Evie beamed. "You? Summer and on."

She was clearly asking if he was sticking around for summer.

"Odd lawn, house, and car jobs are getting me by. This whole street is a mess and the moms in town like to watch me work."

"Yikes."

"It means better pay and tips. I'm taking Heather up on her lifeguard offer this summer. I'll save up, Dad's already going to be asking for rent when I graduate."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Don't wanna bank on that mall they're opening with all the other little shits trying to get jobs first." Billy leaned back to let the cooler air kiss his face, sighing before he tossed his smoke out.

Evie came to the end of the street near the forest, swayed around a streetlamp like she was in an old Hollywood flick. Dreaming long and endless. Sometimes she worried so often that she wasn't living. Just dreaming it all away. Maybe a center line was possible.

Maybe she'd be able to soar over it all.

Billy waited for her to swing back around it before he pressed into her for a slow, lingering kiss. Even better, maybe they both were sharing a dream. Making it of something stronger.

"So, how am I doing?" He joked lighter. Evie gripped the lamp to stay level, head tilting. "Two weeks in, almost three. This whole situation."

"Situation." Evie mused, slyly hiding half her face behind the lamp to hum. The shadowy starlet of a femme fatale she loved to watch on television with her mother. Glinting. Dangerous. "This whole

situation?" She lingered to sigh it even slower.

"You and me." He'd sounded out, drawing nearer. "Us..." Evangeline, always the playful nymph, flitted off playfully. Spinning the other way to walk along so Billy came to her side easily.

"I think you're doing fine." She tapped her chin. "What about me? Evaluate my performance."

"Ah. In a sea of slithery tadpoles, you're a goddamn firecracker." He'd laughed and Evie followed, covering her lips with one hand.

"I don't know how any of that correlates or makes sense, but I'll take it."

"Neither do I. Just made it up to see you do that. The scrunchy thing you do when you're too happy or upset with me." Billy's nose crinkled as he grinned there. Evie came up to peck his freckles.

"You're a total sap, Hargrove." Evie continued, hands clasped behind her back before she inhaled the air. "Let's hit that mini mart nearby. I'm craving a Dr. Pepper. Buy you a soda. It's my turn."

"No, it isn't. You're just being too nice again," Billy remarked, feet shifting slower as they crossed the street. "I can't take you fancy places."

"I don't need to go to fancy places, I just like hanging out with you wherever." Evie turned her head to see him. "We're both poor, we make due. Summer will be better. We can just work and...figure this out. I like it right now though, so don't worry because I know how you shiver in those boots."

She pondered it.

"Do you like it?" Evie offered quieter, earning Billy's eyes searching her expression. Lip twitching, he tossed his arm around her. Brought Evie taut into his frame with an easier grin so they could keep walking toward the whirling, illuminated sign in the distance.

"Yeah, I like it." He decided. "I like you plenty. What's not to like, Evangeline?" His free hand gestured out and Evie beamed to point at

that darling face. Her Eros. Encouraging her wings to unfold without pressure.

"Wow, you're getting better and better at that." A beat. "Making me blush without rolling my eyes."

"Please, Angel, your knees quiver every time I hit you with this smile. You might as well toss off the panties for me." For good measure, he flashed it and Evie hid from his absolute burning charm. Cheeks felt that fire bloom and billow.

A car hurried past them. Sweeping budding flowers and loose leaves about. Delicate, they danced. Trees wobbled back and forth to the wind picking up. Evie stayed looking away to smile that time. Knew this wind would carry her easily.

"Did you have a best friend back in California?" She moved her arm around his back as they went.

"I don't know. Guess I had a few in orbit."

"Am I your best friend here?" She piped back up and Billy slowed to glance, chuckling.

"I thought you and I were avoiding labels."

"It's different." Came the protest.

"No, it isn't." He paused. "Heather's your best friend."

"Yeah, but I figured I could have more than one. Perfectly carved places for each." Evie shifted in front of him, hands smoothing up Billy's shoulders to clasp fingers round his neck. Blue eyes glittered to search.

"You trying to push some admission outta me, Fenny?"

Lashes batted with all the innocence they could hold.

"Just admit it, Hargrove," she pulled him down for a lip lock, pecking his jaw and cheeks until he broke to laugh and hold her at bay. One brow lifted. "It'll be our dirty little secret."

"Fine. Only cause you twisted my arm about it and it gets you hot. You are my very," he palmed her bottom to make her gasp in one motion, "very best friend. Happy?" Billy stole a kiss when she was still dumbfounded, molding their frames together.

"Maybe I am." Evie sighed, sounding too raw and honest about it. She came out to see his eyes there. Tried to read them. Billy blinked to say something else.

"So, you're already thinking about graduation and summer, huh? Moving quick."

"I'm optimistic is all. It's a rare thing with me so I'm just enjoying it. I'm not used to happy and good." Evie got cheeky to hide anything else, winking over her shoulder before she went inside the tiny store.

Fluorescent lights washed out too many colorful packages. They picked cold cans of soda and bright yellow packs of Juicyfruit candies to curb a sweet craving. Billy gripped the paper bag in one fist and Evie snatched his free hand when they got outside.

"C'mon!" She picked up the pace. "Let's catch the bus to the other side of town."

"Billy Hargrove doesn't take the bus. It's all full." He'd complained, still rushing after her to the stop.

"Try something new." Evie was giggling, tugging at him to get on.

With the bus full of residents leaving work, they took some standing room with a group up front. Fingers curled into the handles above, swaying closer together due to the rocking and crowding. A hard turn sent Evie into Billy's chest, her hand sprang out over his shoulder to catch the bar just above his head.

"Trying to jump my bones in public, little Miss Fenny?" He feigned a look of awe, brows lifting playfully. His free arm slipped around the small of Evie's back, bracing her there into his marble frame. "You know how much easier it is if you just ask, Angel?"

Evie wanted to scoff. Wanted to scrunch that annoyed look she was known for. Wanted to send him to the floor and kiss him for miles

and miles. But, she just stood there in the dim, flickering bus lights. Watched his expression relax. Not really breathing until she reminded herself.

Billy seemed to remember as well. At the back and forth shifting of the vehicle, they squished together. Forcing looks away to see the path again. Billy pushed his thigh further between her legs. Both of them idly rubbing together now. Evie felt the heat crawl up her cheeks, lungs trembling. Billy's fist holding the bag shifting a little lower on her back, firm and scalding hot.

She peered up at his jawline. Looked away. Felt Billy's eyes wander back after before he flickered elsewhere. Denim pushed against denim. Billy hitched this breath as if he might whimper. Swallowed it down. Hips swaying back and forth and back again. A thumb pushed deftly into her back. Evie shifting in, lips parting. Trembling as Billy turned his head to see her centimeters from him.

"This is our stop." She'd said in his ear. Leaning flush into him to pull the cord down. Billy inhaled the amber. Brushed his nose into her own while she came back out.

"Don't wanna stop." His freckles looked especially glowy outlined in a rare blush. The bus skidded and Evie veered back with some amusement. Brown eyes casting Billy up and down before she skipped off in a hurry, leaving him to chase her because he'd always chase her. Bag still wrinkled around Billy's fist, he caught up with her. Under the streetlamps surrounded by dancing moths.

"We near Lover's Lake?"

"Yeah, the park nearby. Figured some loitering would do us good." Evie stepped across the grass and sand. Listened to the dark structures creak. "C'mon. I love the swings."

She plopped back into one, legs kicking some before Billy joined her. He cracked one can of soda to offer it, feet shifting over the sand to sway closer together. Chains creaking.

They clicked drinks and guzzled fizz before Evie snagged the candy out. Stealing a few chewy pieces. The bright box got passed back and

forth during a comfortable silence. Billy watched Evie as she observed the moon there.

“Do you know any constellations?” She’d asked quieter, forcing him out of the daze. Curls caught the illumination with stars dotting her dark eyes.

“Not really.” He took the candy back as she swallowed a piece.

“You see that crooked line? Those four little guys, they call that...Salem’s Lot. And...” Evie touched her lips, pointing again. “Those two bright boys there. Called Shawshank. Oh, and that one-”

“These are Stephen King references.” He pushed her.

“No, I’m very smart and they’re real-life constellations. Listen and learn, Billy boy.”

“So, are you gonna call that grouping, The Shining or The Overlook?” He pointed to a cluster and Evie snickered.

“Obviously that’s Carrietta White’s Constellation. Duh. Cause it looks like a rain of blood.” Evie snorted and Billy joined her, heads pressing together as they giggled like school children.

“You know she wears a crushed red velvet dress in the book? Not pink as seen in the movie.” Billy stretched out, finishing his soda.

“You know she’s fat in the book, too?” Evie winked at him, eyed the trash, and tried to toss her can at it. Missing badly, it smacked the rim and fell in the sand with a clatter. “Damn it!” Billy laughed at her louder.

“Don’t try for a career on the court, Evie.” He watched her pout as she plucked it up to throw it away properly. “Now, watch the master work.” He aimed as she sat down. One deft hand reeled back and launched it only to have Evie’s palm smack it easily the other direction. Almost falling out of her seat cackling, she got the candy pushed into her arm before he gawked and went to get it.

“Oh,” she kept up without air, “I thought you were the master? You should have seen your face!”

“Yeah, yeah.” He grumbled, dunking it in the can with an echoing clank. For some cheery consolation, she offered the rest of the box to him. Tiny candy pieces fell into his palm before he pushed them all into his mouth at once, eyes lifting to the sky again. Billy made a face and turned to go to push her swing. “Gimme another constellation.”

“Hmm.” Evie held the chains, began to swing properly at his coaxing. Felt like they were in a secret garden together. Water rippling against the air distantly. Cold chill not bothering either of them. “Those two stars. The little one and the big guy. See?”

Billy gripped the chains, keeping her swing up against him to follow the gaze

“That’s Neverland. Second star to the right and straight on till morning.” She snickered again as Billy pushed her forward. “Bet I can beat you there. I’ll jump from the swing.”

“You’re on.” Billy stole the seat next to her, both of them pumping higher. Curls fluttering. Laughing. Happy because they were together and that mattered.

“I’m going to overthrow Pan and Hook. Become the most fantastic Lost Girl with a siren song to command the island and you’ll write your stories.”

“Think so?” Billy pushed himself higher. Actually thought he might fly with Evie there.

“Yes! You’ll tell the greatest stories ever heard through the land and they’ll echo back down here to be loved too.” She proclaimed that. Not having heard Billy’s stories, but believing what was in his heart.

Time slowed. Wild laughter crackled toward the sky. Utter sparks as they jumped together and collided to roll around the sand. Evie was still alight with joy under him, hair splayed everywhere as Billy snapped up to check her over, hovering. Evie’s giggling tapered off against the night air. She stared up at him. Framed in twinkling stars. He said something she didn’t catch.

“You have beautiful eyes,” Evie sounded out slower, lost in the endless crystalline blue. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean, what?”

“What you said when we were lying in bed together. You said I was the best thing about this place. People never say things like that. Not to girls like me. I believed it when you said it though and it was easy too.” Evie skimmed her fingers over his jacket. Watched Billy’s eyes flicker to recall that moment and the clouds he floated upon like lily-pads in a pond.

Billy swept down. Planted a hot kiss that was all lips. Swelled her mouth when he pulled out. He left Evie fluttered and came to her ear.

“That was a yes.” He pushed up, eyes too sly. “By the way.” Evie took a hand when he offered one and got pulled to her feet, bodies stumbling together. They tried to brush the sand off fabric.

“Do you think about that night? The dance, I mean. Not...the sex. Well, I guess it’s okay to think about the sex actually.” She blushed there when Billy’s lip quirked. His fingers still wrapped around her wrist. “Before all that went down with Brock. It was-”

“Not terrible.” He finished.

“Not at all. The first part of the night, sometimes I wish we could go back and-”

“Rewrite it.” Billy looked around, giving Evie a tug. He pulled her up on the metal roundabout, painted red and blue that was chipping away. “Hold on.” Another smile had curled as he braced to get it spinning.

“Billy!” Evie jerked to hold tight to the bars. Hair flying up. Curls coiled out. Fire billowing gracefully. “What are you doing!”

“Turning back the clock,” he charged and jumped on with her, wobbling to hold something, “to redo it.” Evie grabbed for his coat. Fisting the fabric when they locked eyes. Wind rushed in a thrill with memories tumbling together and apart.

Her wings sprang forth.

Billy made Evie the still point to his turning world. For just a moment. Knew, if anything, that meeting her was something truly important. An unseen force that would twist his heart forever.

Spinning round and round. He recalled the metallic confetti dancing and the way the music pulsed. The carousel began to slow, both teens holding the bars and each other to say level.

Slower, Evie pecked a kiss upon his lips to mirror the first. Unable to come out far, Billy was already closing the distance for the second. Trying to pay her back with a thousand sweet kisses.

Cheers rang and fireworks burst. She remembered it all too. How dizzy and still the world seemed to be. How it hushed for her too sweetly. Billy's hands on her face, cradling delicately to angle the second kiss a little deeper. They felt the metal clink to stillness under them and inched back out.

"I want to go home with you," Evie said the words she wished she had that night. Huge dark eyes glittering. She found his lips again. Not worried about air or what the future held for them. Lost on a rosy haze and perfectly fine for these stolen fleeting seconds. "Can we go?" Billy searched her, thumb sweeping a circle into her jaw. He smiled fully.

"Only if we can take the bus again."

** **

"Happy Birthday!" Evie gushed, offering a gift to a small pile. Max had her arms around her before she'd gotten a chance to turn. One hand shifted to the shorter girl's back. Music whirled with a campy light show, made the horribly patterned carpets glow. "Carol and Heather are on their way in. Tommy's around but he won't hang near the table."

"Neil's going to be late. Work stuff." This explained why Max's smile was so bright. Evie nudged her chin, head cocking. "You brought your own skates."

"I know it's dorky, but they're my babies." Evie gestured to the red skates swung over one shoulder. "Evie Fenny doesn't rent her skates."

"That's El, come meet her," Max pulled Evie off after she got one wave at Susan behind the table setting up. "Billy's grabbing stuff from the car. He drove us."

El Hopper was a tiny thing. Almost like a little bird compared to Hopper's hulking frame behind her. She peered around and seemed at instant ease upon seeing Max.

"El, this is my neighbor, Evie," Max introduced them, "she's cool."

El made this gesture like she had a needle and poked at her hand.

"Yes!" Max got it, tugging Evie's arm. "She taught me the felting thing."

"Hope the sharp objects weren't a bother in your house, Chief Hopper." Evie perked up at Jim with a sheepish expression. "I should have asked you, I know it might seem a little dangerous."

He actually laughed at that. If only she knew the danger these kids had gotten into prior.

"Believe me, crafts are a welcomed change."

"El, nice to meet you. I'm Evie. Max talks about you all the time." Evie held out her hand and the young girl looked shocked. "Good things."

A slower smile crossed. She took Evie's hand to shake it. Awkward about her navigation but trying to take everything in. Clearly never been to a party like this one. Kids of various ages circled the floor on skates. Laughing. Holding hands.

"Max...talks about you too. I like your hair." El mirrored. Peered to Hopper with a pleased expression he matched. She offered Max a wrapped gift. Evie grinned and touched her curls, pulled up into two high, rounded buns.

"C'mon, let me show you the table they're setting up." Max took

El's wrist to usher her off.

"Are you...staying to skate?" Evie turned to the Chief.

"El's, ah, not used to crowds. She came from some unfortunate circumstances. I'd like to stay close. First party. Maybe I'm hovering." He pushed his hands into his pockets. Not in uniform. Evie beamed a little.

"She's young, you're worried. It's sweet, actually. You're just being a good dad." The smile seemed to dither in her eyes. Even when Jack was married to Mona, he wasn't always around. Work and trips kept him busy, but he stayed close to Evie the moment he arrived home with his little gifts and endless stories. "Don't come running over if she falls, we got her."

"Yeah, uh, if you could keep an eye on El when you see her around. That would mean a lot to me. I know you babysat the Henderson kid. El doesn't need a babysitter, she's just... This is new for her." Jim gestured. Digging for a smoke he couldn't have in the immediate area.

"Heather, Carol, and I will keep an eye out."

"Carol?" He chuckled. "Perkins?"

"Oh, yeah, we made up. Funny thing."

"Almost as funny as you hanging out with the Hargrove boy through winter." He quirked his brow.

"What can I say, Chief..." Evie shrugged. "I'm...branching out."

As if on cue, Billy paced in a side door. Bag clutched under one arm. He caught Evie's glance instantly. Both of them locked in and back out on cue. Blue eyes shifted up and down because she was wearing his denim jacket over a little lacy, floral top tucked into her jeans.

Neil would arrive and they had an act to keep up. Ignoring each other.

"I'll sit far." Jim offered. "Pretend I'm not here."

She about cackled, lost in thought still.

"I'll just pretend you're my real dad," Evie winced at herself, saw him pause with some subtle awe, "oof, I'm not sure where that came from. Ouch. Okay. Walking away now. Sorry, Chief."

"Evie." He eased a gentle hand toward her. "What I said. If there's...anything going on. You can talk to me. On or off the record."

"*Yeap*. Right. I'm okay. I'm...I'm gonna...skate. Yeah. Sorry. Oh, my..." Evie whirled to hurry off, cringing all the way to the table. "I think I just had a mental break."

"What?" Heather had chuckled.

"Nothing. Time to skate?" Came Evie's begging. Agreement followed.

Hopper made himself scarce with a cigarette and plate of cheese fries in the corner. Billy plopped himself into a chair behind the decorated table, looking disinterested. Not catching Evie's eyes while she sat with the girls to put her skates on. Just watched Susan set out plates for pizza and cake.

Evie went out with Heather first for a lap, both of them giggling and pulling little stunts to show off for Tommy who was on the ground as Carol pulled at him. Max jumped over his leg, cackling before she tried to get El to come out with them.

"Kinda reminds me of us. They're too cute." Heather quipped, whirling to skate backward. They joined the younger girls, hoping to get El relaxed and away from the wall she seemed to cling to. Every turn, Evie shot Billy a look. Got his lips quirking before he ruefully was peering away.

"Do you want to skate, Billy?" Susan had asked after a beat, weary of the music already. Bit of a glittery disco mess. That same dreamy rose haze in the air.

"About as much as I want to give my old man a sponge bath,

Susan.” Billy frowned for effect and dropped it when she actually laughed at him. It was an easier thing for them to talk without Neil’s shadow.

“Well, the offer is open if you want to.” Susan thought to tell him Evie looked beautiful today when she caught him staring at her for the third time but decided not to be obvious. Not yet.

“You’re supposed to tell me I’m being inappropriate and I’m going to send your only daughter down with me.” He recited easily.

“I was your age once, Billy, I know how to laugh still.” Susan seemed surprised at the revelation herself. Slowly, she took a seat next to him. Not leaving another chair as a buffer like she usually did. “It might not be so bad. Her following you, you know, after this. When she’s older. She still looks up to you.”

It became clear what Susan was asking him. Max would resent her one day down the line. For the choices she made. The things she couldn’t stop no matter how hard she tried. Maybe Billy and Max didn’t always get along, but he’d be a safer place for her than whatever was leftover in that house. Susan would always be under Neil Hargrove, but she could ensure her daughter would not be. One day.

Billy leaned forward on his elbows, palms rubbing. He felt for his ring and remembered it was hidden under Evie’s dipping sweetheart neckline. He didn’t say anything, but met Susan’s eyes.

“Evie’s been a good friend to her.” Susan crossed her legs and sat back to watch the girls laugh. Slowly easing into the conversation. El wobbled, holding hands with Max and Evie to gain some speed. Heather was trying to help Carol steady poor Tommy. “Don’t you think so?”

“I haven’t noticed.” Billy turned his head aside.

“She’s very pretty. Kind. That’s all I’m saying. She and her mother, they’re nice neighbors to have on Cherry.”

“Jesus, Susan, why don’t you date them both?” Billy shot up to go

to the snack counter. Susan ghosted this smile after him, hands clasping. "Cheese fries. Jalapenos...Extra jalapenos." He got his plate and turned to see Chief Hopper's cigarette glow red. "You got any more of those? My pack is out and they don't have a machine in this joint."

Jim just eyed him.

"I'm legal." Billy puffed before a stick flicked across the table. "Camels. Unfiltered. Disgusting. Are you a flannel hobo of some kind with those?"

The Chief gawked at him.

"Don't you smoke Reds? Baby's first cigarette."

Billy matched him. Offended.

"I'm smoking with the big boys, Hop. You should try it."

"You in a place to complain, kid?" Jim reached to take it back before Billy swiped, lighting up to puff.

"No, sir." His lighter snapped shut. "You unable to cut the cord or is dressing like a lumberjack to hang out at a 70s roller disco a hobby?"

"Haven't seen you down at the station in a while. Few months, in fact. Turning over a new leaf this year?" Jim remarked instead, leaning forward on his elbows.

"Aw. You miss me or something? Your boys finally get tired of chasing me down? Or trying to." Billy gave this comedic pout, head turning to eye Evie again. Graceful swan that she was out there. His jacket hanging off her shoulders, exposing that neck. Little wisps of curls swayed about from her space buns decorated with matching glittery star barrettes, loose hair framing her face. Brown eyes flicked up and he snatched his gaze away. "Guess I found something else to get into that isn't trouble. You guys bore me down there, I like to be amused."

"The real crime-stopper, boredom. Color me impressed and

shocked.” Jim seemed to like that, eyes rolling. Billy puffed and swept a piece of tobacco from his mouth. “I guess whatever you’re doing, keep it up.” He watched Billy crunch on some salty jalapenos, plucking five gooey fries at once to swallow them down. Almost starved.

“I intend to.” Billy flicked his greasy fingers to his brow. “Chief.”

“William.”

Billy mumbled as he went off, finishing the smoke to flick it out a back door. Eyes shifting to watch the girls plus poor Tommy. El was already better than him.

“Man, I’m dying out here. Help me. I’ll tag you in.” Tommy scrambled up the sidewall and clung, out of breath. Freckles all dewy.

“You wanted to be a good boyfriend,” Billy cackled for good measure, “that’ll teach you.”

“Feed me a fry,” Tommy begged over the barrier.

“Fuck out of here, they’re mine. My dad will show soon so you can disappear to a corner and get your own damn fries.” To make it a point, Billy stood there and fed himself.

Behind Tommy, Max skidded and fell with Evie barely catching her. Both girls had gone down in a fit of giggling.

“We’re fine, go on!” Max waved to Heather and El ahead of them. Carol came to steal Tommy back as Billy craned to see his step-sister.

“You alright?” Evie was picking her up when Max’s shirt slipped closer to her pale shoulder, flashing a burst of purple there the size of a softball. “Oh, my god.” It slipped out before she could stop it.

“That’s-!” Max cut herself off and fixed her shirt. Spring was creeping and all she donned was long-sleeved and frumpy. Dressing almost like Susan. “I fell, you know, on my board.” Evie tried to give her the dignity of a look that said she believed it. Must have cracked. “Evie, it’s nothing. Don’t worry. Please.”

Dressing like Susan. Sounding like Billy.

“Max, my house is-”

“I know, but don’t... Don’t say anything. Not to Billy or my mom, ah... Neil’s here.” Max put her head down and skated around Evie to go away.

There was something particularly helpless about watching a young girl flee obediently to her monster. Evie wondered if this was what she looked like to Billy headed to Fredrick's place.

Small. Scared. Lost.

Neil Hargrove started with words. Lots of horrible words that whittled Max down to a hard pit. Then pushing. Then some grabbing. Then shoving. Into walls mostly.

The hit didn’t bruise Max. It was more of a swipe to make her go to her room for talking back. Whatever that meant to Neil. But, he was drunk and he caught her jaw with an open palm. That stayed red for the day until she snuck a pack of frozen peas, not wanting Susan or Billy to know.

But, the swipe sent her into the dining room table. Left the violet petals bursting under her skin. Evie lost the urge to skate and came out. Saw Billy’s eyes again and paused to help Heather usher El out for food.

“You’re a natural.” Evie complimented which earned a full smile. El opened her mouth to speak before Billy appeared in front of them.

“They’re making us sing.” He cocked his head, peering at El. “You’re the one with the funny name, aren’t you?”

“Jane. But,” she seemed to have trouble staring at him for more than three extended seconds and pointed to her chest, “El.” Red crept across her cheeks. Billy towered over her, cocking a wider grin to play up the fact that she was all blushy for a pretty older boy.

“El?” He raised one brow. “What’s the L stand for?”

"Ignore him." Heather pulled the younger girl around Billy as he chuckled, pausing to see Evie. Her colorless expression.

"You okay?" He said it hard with a furrowed brow.

"Fine." She tried to make it sound cold but it came out near silent. Head turned down as she flitted around him to join the party.

Neil, stiff and stoic, pressing his lips like he was at the damn DMV. Susan plastered a broader grin to dote on him after his long day, lingering close to his side as they set out pizza and readied the cake.

It was all so routine. Like getting your shots.

Pizza. Sing. Candles. Wish. Cake. Gifts. Thank you.

Billy and Evie took the farthest seats from each other. Played a game of glance and ignore that they'd made up on the spot. They both were either losing or winning.

"Strange," Neil remarked as he pulled Max aside for another slice. "You and the high school girls."

"Oh, I invited El too, she's my age. I didn't want to leave Evie out and the girls...they're nice to me."

"They don't dress like nice girls."

Heather and Carol both donned perfectly normal tees and jeans. Nothing would suffice for Neil Hargrove. Max shifted her cake around. No longer hungry for it.

"Maybe we'll talk about the type of girl you should hang around at a later time. The Fenny girl is nice enough, even if her shirt is a little too...low. Dresses kinda tight. Bit of an odd one. She's different. Her friends, well...I'm just not sure, Maxine."

"Yes, sir." She looked at her birthday cake like it was infested with worms. Carefully forced a bite and set it aside.

Max hung around. Smiled and thanked everyone after each birthday present. Even hugged Neil only cause he opened his arms at

her. She said bye to El then Heather. Carol seemed to be turning in as well so Tommy went out back to get the car.

As the party went on and dwindled, Evie caught Billy's eyes gesturing to the rental counter. He slipped around the corner into the many shelves and Evie turned back to see Max and Susan at the table. Neil seated in a chair not helping them clean up, eyes elsewhere. Casually, she skated around and got her arm snatched. A gasp snuffed against a pair of lips. Kisses hidden away from the world.

"Paid the kid a few coins and a threat to leave for ten minutes."

Music vibrated the shelves. Evie put her arms around Billy.

"I still have skates on."

"Even better. I might have a thing for girls in red skates." Billy was all hands, holding Evie steady. Pulling one leg around his hip. Pushing denim into denim. Hot friction might have done her in any other day.

"We are not hooking up with all the smelly rental skates." Evie laughed into his lips, still pecking back and peering over her shoulder. She paused to see his eyes. Wanted to blurt what she'd seen on Max's body. Even to Billy now, it felt wrong. So, she said something else.

"Hey, we should...keep an eye on your sister, you know. It's her birthday. She's...She needs her big brother."

Billy huffed into her neck.

"Fine, fine, but you'll regret not taking the adventure on here."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Evie shifted. "My feet hurt and we can make-out in my bed later." She kissed his neck. "I'll do that thing you like if you promise you went easy on the product down there."

"Only dotted the gold crown. Scout's honor." Billy winked and she rolled her eyes. He peered out first. "Give it a second then follow."

"Wait." Evie thumbed her red lipstick from his mouth. "Now,

shoo.” Billy licked his lips and snuck out. She waited a moment. Let the happy butterflies land in her stomach then followed. Pausing, her skates came off for more comfortable tennis shoes.

“Evangeline, do you need a ride home with us later?” Neil had asked.

“No, thank you, I was getting a ride with Carol now.” She smiled and looked for red hair to say her goodbyes. “Where’d Max go?” Evie collected her coat and Susan paused to peer around.

“She was here a second ago. Neil?” Hands dropped a stack of plates into the trash.

“Probably went to the bathroom.” He shrugged, squinting at all the moving lights that were making his head pound. “Billy, go find your sister.”

Billy seemed to notice the look on Evie’s face and feel the same chill before he hurried off without fighting. Susan looked through the sea of kids and teens meandering as Evie passed her to check the ajar side door.

“Max!” The one flickering light at the exit made her skin crawl. A cry echoed distantly followed by a dull crash in the dark. Like a bag of trash hitting the dumpster.

Evie dropped her skates to follow the hollowed-out sound. Exhaust swept up her nose and tires gave a harsh wail, horns sounding while a faraway car disappeared around a row of trees to get to the main street with the rest.

“Max!” Evie charged out. Heart painfully thudding within her ribs.

“Evie?” Carol heard her and footsteps echoed around the building.

“Max!” Evie was near tears now. A shift in some fallen trash bags made her pause when two sneakers appeared around the side of the dumpster. This odd scratching sound left her lips. Evie threw herself over the tiny body there, turned Max’s limp frame over.

Her shirt collar was ripped open where someone grabbed her. Or

tried to. Dragging then dropping her when she put up a fight. Bleeding scrapes and dirt scuffed all over her pale freckled skin from the rough tumble. Carol got to them first and pulled off her sweater to cover Max's torso while Evie gathered her up.

"Help!" Carol called because Evie couldn't. More bodies arrived. Tommy. Susan. Billy. Neil.

"Neil, she won't wake up." Susan pulled her daughter out of Evie's arms, shaking her. Moans filtered out, but nothing else. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I saw...a car. It was too dark. I just found her here on the ground. Someone tried to..." Evie wheezed out and never finished, gesturing aimlessly.

"Susan, give Maxine to Billy. She needs a hospital." Neil swept down as Billy urged his sister's tiny body away. This hard, flamed expression on his face as if he wasn't really here.

Max looked broken. Not real. A doll left under the bed for too long without love or cherished stories to comfort it. Evie felt the knees of her jeans soak through from the wet pavement. Too many words hit the air and Evie's eyes dropped to where that harsh car had gone to.

Evangeline wondered what kind of monster would grab up a little girl and throw her out into the trash.

And why the world bore so many of that same design.

Notes for the Chapter:

Mad Max :(Her story line is gonna start to push toward the front here and there with Evie's in pieces. Thanks again for following the fic, I really appreciate it! Please please comment or kudo if you liked it! Chat with me below or on my tumblr, Alias_B xx

21. Days In The Sun

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello all. I'm shifting so I'm only posting my fics here now. Not tumblr. If you're still with me, thank you so much for everything. TW: Hospitals, rape mention in conversation, Pica, slight nod to past abuse/child abuse, and asshole science teachers. Smut!!!

Max begins to heal with help from friends. Billy and Evie fall deeper. Prom chatter begins around Hawkins High.

Hospitals were always such a bleak and sterile affair. Might have been the dull ache in Evie's gut making the anxiety of it worse. Might have been the fact that she couldn't take Billy's hand despite them sitting across from each other.

Max woke and they prodded with tests into the late hours. Parents only. Evie sent Carol off with her faithful skates and stayed after calling her mother. Just said it was the neighborly thing.

"Do you think whoever grabbed her...?" Billy tried to say the word, flicking his lighter several times because his skin was crawling. Evie shook her head.

"No."

"They probably tried, but she fought back. If that car... If they put her in that car, they would have."

"They didn't, she's safe. The Chief is looking into it."

"In the dark with no camera around the place. No description of that fucker or his car. Yeah, I'm sure the bastard will just turn himself in." Billy snapped that and Evie flushed, eyes elsewhere. He exhaled a shudder and recalibrated. "You found her. You found my sister."

It was the closest thing to 'thank you' Evie would hear from him tonight. Billy met her eyes when they turned back. A crack.

“Neil’s hitting her.” Evie stared at her hands and rushed the words out before regret could seep. “I saw a bruise and I saw her face when I looked at it. She didn’t want you to know. I shouldn’t be saying anything and I’m sorry, but you have to know.”

She inhaled sharper. Stopped and waited for an uneasy beat.

“I’m bound to see it sooner or later.” Billy’s face contorted. But, briefly. “I hoped he’d hold out. Focus on me and my shit. Guess I haven’t been getting into much shit lately.”

He got quiet. Monotone.

“Don’t bring it up ever again. I’ll handle it.”

“Billy.”

“Evie.” He cut that. “I got it.” She frowned at him.

“Can I sit by you?”

“No.” It came out a bit softer. They sat in silence for a few moments longer. Billy’s boot came out and nudged her shoe. Evie pushed back, fingers curling around the chain his ring was sitting on.

“I wish I had more to tell Hopper-”

“I’m glad you’re here.” Billy replied instead, wincing. He didn’t say more and Evie didn’t ask for anything else. Silence again. Shoes nudging back and forth. Long luxurious beats. “I wrote this story about you. Short thing to pass time in AP Bio.”

He said it all so nonchalantly. Not looking at her. Still idly flicking the lighter.

“You did?”

“Not the first, but it’s the most coherent. Feels like most of my shit is bullet points.”

“And this one wasn’t?” She paused to see him nod. Cheeks heating.

"I had this dream that night about you is why. You know, after the park. And the bus. And the bedroom." Billy was rubbing his eyes like it was silly. Like it didn't consume him. Utterly.

"Is it about the Lost Girl?" Evie let her lips upturn and Billy shrugged, not answering. "Does it have a happy ending?" He licked his lips and stopped playing with the lighter for one moment.

"I don't think the chances are hurt." Lashes fluttering.

"Ah." Evie leaned back to nod. "That song I was strumming. Last time you spent the night after we went to our bridge."

"It's about me?"

"Maybe. Maybe it's about us. You and me." Evie pressed her mouth. Tried to lift his spirits. "She's gonna be alright."

Billy sighed, head shaking tightly.

"In this house, she won't ever be."

Evie didn't argue with that. After a while, Neil returned with Susan under one arm. Her pale face splotched in red and worry.

"Maxine's resting. Billy, take Susan to the machines. Get her some coffee." He ordered and plucked some change from his pocket. Billy jumped up to fight him. Hard and intent.

"Let me see Max."

"Take your mother to get some coffee. Now. You'll see Maxine after." Neil peered at Evie. Tried to be dangerous enough to spook Billy while keeping his dad of the year composure. She stared him down in response, inching in front of Billy.

"Mr. Hargrove, can I see Max?" Evie welled for good measure, spoke up mostly so they didn't fight. She caught Billy's side eye as Susan came to him with her head down. "Please, sir? My mother will be here soon to pick me up. She's worried too. I just hoped to say goodbye."

“Very well,” Neil couldn’t think of an excuse and gestured so Evie went with him. Down the hallway to Maxine’s room labeled with her name in neat font.

Neil passed the door and Evie wiped the chalk subtly so it only said *Max*.

“I’d rather you didn’t wake her. Not that she will wake, they put her on something. To help with sleep.”

“Of course.” Evie followed Neil in and stopped. Watched the dim light stretch his shadow over the bed. In the doorway, she wondered why it seemed so haunting.

A father’s shadow crawling over his daughter’s bed. It should have been a comfort. Evie gave this little shudder and Neil turned to stare at her there. Seemingly trying to figure something about her out that didn’t click. Evie was used to that from others.

Instead, he faced the bed. Watched Max breathe. They patched her up and she appeared even smaller there. Paled and sunken. Seemingly peaceful. Hiding a storm that would ravage later. Neil’s shoulders came up and Evie didn’t move.

“Son of a bitch didn’t rape her,” Neil uttered with this exhale of true relief that he’d held in too long, “that’s what they told us. Probably taking her somewhere to do it and kill her.” Even after the initial shock, Evie couldn’t respond to something so frank. Neil’s even voice, low with a glimmer of anger. He sniffed and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. Arms crossed tight. “Rather he kill her than rape her.”

A horrific, chilling pulse underscored by the hard beats of Max’s heart across the way.

“I’m sure that sounds horrible to you. I say that it’s a blessing. That’s all.” He made this odd sound low in his throat. Looked over his shoulder and saw something in the corner that Evie didn’t. Something that haunted Neil Hargrove to his marrow. Evie bet it had blonde hair and ocean eyes. “Maxine. She’s a willful thing. Even if she hides like I don’t see it. I probably know better than most... She

bit him.”

“Hm?”

“Son of a bitch who grabbed her. She fought him off. Bit him here.” Neil motioned to his left bicep. “Probably leave a scar. I know she gave that guy hell, whoever tried...”

He tapered off. Saw that ghost in the corner again. Curled up in wait.

“This kinda stuff...” Neil turned, met Evie’s eyes with something cagey hiding behind his glossy stare.

There was this moment. This one moment of sadness. Not pity. Just a mourning for a parent that never was. A child that lost them. An awareness for the things he’d done in his life. Things he’d never face. Never take back. Never make right.

“...It happens to pretty girls in San Diego. Those girls who go out late and dress like... It’s not supposed to happen here. Not in Hawkins, Indiana.”

“They hurt girls everywhere, sir. Boys, too.” Evie managed. Picturing herself before a hungry lion.

Neil gave this nod, almost like he agreed with her. Didn’t make her feel foolish for voicing it. For believing it.

Evie found herself crossing to steal his hand in both of hers. Fierce about it. Probably shocking him with her empathy and her huge, glimmering eyes. She felt callouses on his knuckles.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hargrove.” For him. For Susan. For Max. For Billy. For his mother. She got softer and sounded like a little girl. “Don’t be sad, sir.”

Neil perked to see her face and something sparked. Spots. Covering his expression like a paper mask. Evie sunk into them. Recalled a silent memory.

“Daddy?” She must have been six. Sneaking into his office one

night. There might have been shouting before it. Like a storm. Like thunder. She didn't understand.

"Mouse." Jack Fenny lifted his head from his hands as she scurried around in her pink nightie. Offering him a bear that made her feel better when she was down.

"Don't be sad, daddy."

Jack did something peculiar. Set the bear aside and picked a camera from his desk to snap her photograph there. To capture her in this specific moment of time. Trapping Evie in the empathy of it that would become her paper mask as well. She wondered if the girl that used to belong to her was still caged in that frame. Reckless and messy, but still trying and kind.

The sparks blinded her in white.

Flash. Milky spots lingered before Evie saw Neil there again. His thumb swept her fingers.

"Thank you, Evangeline." He paused and she slipped away. Not breathing. "Evie."

No longer hearing him, she crossed to the bed.

"Feel better, Max. If I can do anything, my mom and I. Let us know." Pecked a kiss into her cool temple. Turning to go off.

"Evie." Neil pressed again. Harder. She stared at the door, thought about running out to find that bear because she never saw it again. It must have needed her to hold it. Unsteady, her curls shifted as she peered back. "Do me a favor."

Evie blinked in lieu of a reply.

"Be good." He spoke. "Call your father, tell him you love him. I'm sure he'd like to hear that. Just once."

"I would if I could."

"Your mother mentioned it was a separation. Not a death."

"He's missing," Evie's head cocked, "technically." This bold flare sparked and she came to him. She didn't spin a fake line about how her father loved her and cherished her and surely missed her every day. "He never said goodbye to me."

"Then it wasn't a goodbye yet." He replied smoother. Colder.

"He didn't say, I love you."

"He owes you one." It shocked her to hear Neil say that.

"Do you tell Max and Billy you love them?" Evie pleaded there. Getting bolder so he didn't look aside. "That you're proud of them? That they're everything to you? That Billy was your little prince and he still is? He must have been the most beautiful baby. Pure sunlight."

"He was. Even when he wailed his little head off, he was." Neil twitched this smirk like he was remembering one moment in time when they were happier. The last time he touched it. A day in the sun.

"Do you tell him?"

"They know I do what's best." Neil stood straighter to look at her softening face. "I'm sure, even in leaving, your father's doing what he thinks is best for the family... Juliet. She had problems. She brought all her problems home, put them inside Billy. Our only son. If she left from the start... Clean break."

Neil only shook his head.

It jarred Evie that she hadn't known her name until now. Billy's lost mother. Even he couldn't speak it.

"I had to be the bad guy. Had to force her off cause she didn't want to get better. Billy will thank me one day. He'll see why I did it. She walks out and still won't let him go." He bit the inside of his cheek, tasted the same rust he always seemed to on days he thought of her. "I did it for both of them. I fought for my son and the courts agreed."

He put on the better act. Neil rubbed his eyes. Evie didn't know

what to say. Couldn't get her feet moving. She hated him and mourned him all at once.

"She took the coward's way out, you know...and made herself a martyr for Billy. Not like he'd remember being left in a hot car while his mother bought drugs. Not like he'd remember starving in her care. Crying in my arms with rashes, stinking and bony after being with her when I was working." Neil shook his head, ruefully. He'd never touch the sun again.

Evie felt her eyes well.

"She wasn't bad." Neil decided. Quieter. "She didn't want to be. But, she was bad for Billy. Some women aren't meant to be mothers even if they want to be."

"I think some women aren't meant to be daughters either." Evie sighed that. Neil peered at her again. Tried to pick the blunt syllables apart.

"She loved Billy. Don't get me wrong. I didn't want her to just..." Neil swallowed the hard lump all the way down. Evie knew the feeling well. "But, I think if she just got one phone call before. Maybe things would be different. Billy's always going to resent me for it. If that's what it takes to keep him on the narrow. Fine. He'll thank me. He will."

He sounded the same as Evie. The certain way she spoke of her father loving her. Never hurting her. That stung deep.

She could have burst. Beat her fists on him. Pushed him out the glass window. Thank you for a beating. For bleeding. For ire. For bruises. For growing up feeling unwanted. Maybe Billy's mother was a mess and unfit too, but that wouldn't make up for any of it.

Evie wanted to scream at Neil to tell Billy he loved him. To hold him. To let him cry for everything. To get down on his knees and grovel before the son he let down. To let the sun back inside his heart with the moon's glow to match it. But, maybe that was just it.

This all happened and there wasn't much to turn it around. Sun,

moon, stars. They wouldn't fall for him. Neil made his bed. He hit Billy. Max. Susan probably. He made a family of paper dolls that played their parts because of fear. Because playing your part is better than a beating.

And her father, he...

He...

And Neil could only lie to himself at the end of it. Admitting you let your child down was too much for a parent to bear. Evie saw it in Mona's eyes once a day.

Evie was too empathetic for her own good. She loathed it. There was so much pain and she didn't know how to not notice it.

"Sir?" She clasped her hands together because this urge to grab his again reminded her too much of Fredrick. Neil tilted again to see her there looking small. Evie's chin lifted. "Max and Billy. I like having them as neighbors. They're good. They're both really good..."

She destroyed Neil Hargrove.

"You have good kids." Despite everything.

He tried not to choke.

"Thank you, Evangeline." Neil watched her turn to go out. Evie crossed her arms tight, held her coat closer. She bid Susan farewell at the coffee machines. Caught Billy leaned next to one trying to press a cup into Susan's shaky fingers.

"My mother's probably almost here." Evie cleared her throat. Not looking at either of them. Instead, she stared at a crack in the white ceiling. Billy tried and failed to catch her eyes. Susan hugged her tightly with a thank you. Evie wouldn't let herself melt.

"I'll walk her out. Neighborly." Billy shoved his hands into his pockets and ushered Susan to go toward the room. He had to catch up with Evie because her strides picked up quick. "Hey."

Nothing.

“Evie, wait a second.” He gripped her elbow as they left out a side door. She gave this cringe that made him let go. “Hey, what’d my dad say to you?”

“Nothing. Nothing, I just... I want Max to feel better and I want you both to be safe and I...” She shook her head with watery eyes, blurring Billy’s pretty face apart.

“We both know that’s bullshit, he upset you.”

“He just... He talked about you and he talked about Juliet.” Evie tried to see him through a sea of dancing spots.

The name shattered something in Billy’s gaze.

“*Christ*. He won’t even talk to me about her.” He scoffed, looking away because it hurt him more than he’d ever admit. “Gave up asking.”

Evie gave this whimper and crushed Billy’s body into her. Arms tossed around the small of his back to squeeze. Billy hiked his hands up in shock. Moonlight streamed down. Warming almost. Evie pushed her head into his chest, face scrunching up as tears trickled down. She held him. A particular embrace that wasn’t one bit selfish.

Billy felt himself relax to hold her in return. Palm cupping the back of Evie’s hair. He set his chin on her crown. Closed his eyes like he might make a wish. Let Evie embrace all of him. They stayed like that with the moon exposing their neon hearts. Finding the sun and starlight for themselves.

“You know, I fucking...” Evie laughed at herself, chin pressed into his chest as she peered up when he shifted. “I always hated those cheesy lines. Oh baby, I wish I met you earlier...” She sniffled so Billy reached to swipe a loose tear away.

Evie didn’t like crying in front of him or anyone, but it seemed to ache less as he touched her there.

“...But, I really wish I had met you earlier and not run. God damn. I don’t know what I’m trying to say. I just see...so much around me and I can’t stop it. And our parents, god, they’re...they seem fine with it

all. All this pain. I don't want to be like that. I just don't want our hearts to rot and die when we get older like our parents did. I wanna feel the sun and the moon on my face forever and never let it go and I want to share it with you. Anyone who needs it. Can you just tell me we won't be like them?"

"Evie..."

"I don't care if you lie. I still want you to promise me, Billy. Please."

"We won't be like our parents." He thumbed another tear aside. "I promise, Evie. Your heart isn't gonna rot and die." As Billy lied. Or maybe tried not to. Evie felt something unfurl that cleared the spots away.

She cared about him.

She trusted him.

She wanted to protect him.

She could fall in love with him. So easily too.

"It won't." He repeated. "Your heart's too unruly for that shit."

"I don't know what I'm saying. I don't. It's all too much. Sometimes, I just feel sorry for the girl that I was, but I think she pities me all the same. Maybe more."

"It does sound like you're trying to say you want to kiss me though." Billy tipped her chin. Stole her swollen lips. Made her too breathless to cry anymore. His thumb swept under her eyes again to dry them. Hands cupped her face, brought Evie in so he could kiss her forehead and linger. "I'll call. Or knock on your window. Whatever comes first."

Billy managed a smile so Evie matched it, hands sliding up to grip at his coat.

"Keep me updated. My mom will probably be cooking up whole meals for me to send over. Just...I'm here." Evie said, seeming to realize the magnitude of that. "I'm here with you." *For you.*

There was hope that meant something.

She neared him for a final kiss before Billy perked.

“Mona’s car.” They stepped from each other. Eyes locking when too many words perished between them. Back to rest in the warm soil.

“I’ll see you.” Evie paused and slipped one earring off. Little dangle spike in gold. She picked up Billy’s palm and closed it around the metallic piece. Letting him slide away.

“If I don’t...” Billy eyed the car again. “Monday. School.”

“Right.” Evie shuddered and stepped further. “Bye, Billy.”

“Goodbye, Evie.”

His lighter flicked open so he could smoke. Changing the small hoop in his ear out with the one Evie offered. He licked his teeth and let the smoke billow out, watching her hurry down the steps.

Evie paused at the bottom to flick her curls and see him. Lips inching up in a way that was hopeful. Billy felt that resonate and cocked his head before she got in the car.

“Baby, I’m so sorry that I couldn’t be there. I had a walk-in five minutes to closing. Mayor’s wife had an emergency. That’ll teach her to try other salons that aren’t mine.” Mona leaned over to pepper Evie in kisses, squeezing her. “How’s Max? Is she-?”

“Resting. Probably all shook up. Some guy, he just...grabbed her. She fought him off. But she’s roughed up pretty bad.”

“Poor thing.” Mona quivered, looking away because a ghost was haunting her too. Evie wondered if she had a ghost. “I’ll make something nice. Send flowers to Susan and Neil. I can’t...I can’t imagine. That could have been anyone. It could have been you.”

She faced away to wipe her tears so Evie didn’t see them.

“I’m okay, mom.” It felt like such a lie, but she dressed it up so well. Frills and lace.

"In Hawkins, too, I just... Ah, we'll just have to keep looking out for each other. Turn the other cheek. She's safe. She'll be at home. I'm sure Billy will stick close." Mona paused, shifting to drive off. "Was that him saying goodbye to you?"

"Yes, he just walked me out. It's dark." Evie peered aside.

"And he's got nothing to do with all the new songs my girl is writing."

"Mom..." Evie broke to blush. "He was being decent, is all."

"It's just nice to see you two getting along." Mona messed with the music. Played some Dolly Parton. Evie sighed and fell back, not replying. The silence almost said more. They got to Cherry where a car waited. "Who is that near the driveway?"

"Steve." Evie squinted to see better in the dark, badly lit street. She hurried out as Steve jumped from his BMW to come to her.

"Evie!" He grasped her elbows at the same time palms touched his chest. "You okay? Max?"

"I'm okay, I'm fine," Evie didn't sound as convincing in front of him. She settled into Steve's arms. Inhaled some comfort hugging him. Still embraced, she turned to see her mother. "Mom, can you give us a moment?"

"Don't stay out in the dark late. I'll wait up for you." Mona smiled at Steve there and went up to the house.

"What are you doing here, Steve?"

"Wanted to make sure you got home safe." He replied. Sounding too lovely about it. "El called us."

"Us?"

"Yeah...ah..." He gestured to the vehicle with one hand, still keeping Evie under his arm. The doors of his car opened. Four curious boys hurried out. "We were doing a D&D thing. I suck at it. They insisted on staying up."

“Dustin...you guys.” Evie slipped from Steve to go to them. All getting closer to her height. Mike and Will both were at her eye level. Almost taller.

“We can’t go see, Max. No way Neil would let us. He’d just get mad.” Lucas came to Evie, near frantic. “Is she okay? What happened? El said some guy tried to grab her. They have no idea who it was. That’s bullshit!”

“I know. I didn’t...I didn’t see anything. He got away. She’s just gonna need her friends and support when she gets out.” Evie touched his shoulder and moved to fix one of Dustin’s curls aside out of a babysitter habit. “You all are sweet to come out here. I wish I could sneak you in. I know it’d bring her spirits up. She should be out tomorrow. I’m hoping.”

They all sighed in sync.

“What if this creep tries to come for her again? Or someone else?” Mike asserted, exchanging looks because he was thinking of El. Of the bad men.

“We’ll watch out for each other,” Will spoke, “same as we always do.”

“If I see Max before you four, I’ll let her know how badly you miss her and you’re all thinking about her. Promise.” Evie swore that.

“It’s good, you can watch that house close cause we can’t.” Dustin offered. “Max doesn’t like it. Neil’s an asshole.”

“She needs her friends, best you can do is support her. Just go on home, get some rest. She needs her party strong. El and I both can keep watch, I know she’s eager to check on Max, too.” Evie shifted to rest her hand on Steve’s arm, lips pressing sweeter as she caught his eyes.

“Been through a lot together.” Dustin piped back up, sounding more assured. “We’ll get through this too.”

“That’s the spirit.” Evie let them shift to bear hug her. “You’re all getting so tall, jeez.” She turned back to Steve, head cocking before

she kissed his cheek. "Sleep, you as well. I'm glad you guys came."

"Yeah, call us if you hear anything. See you, Monday." Steve's hand slipped from her back. They watched her go up the steps into her house. Waited for a lock to click before turning to drive off.

"He'll be judged by someone. The sick bastard." Mona decided to stay up and wash dishes. Evie came to watch her mother's back. "I'll say a prayer for Max. Perhaps to a couple gods tonight. One is bound to listen."

"Is someone judging dad?" She saw her mother clench, stilling. Slowly, Mona continued. Scrubbing filth away. Wishing it was always this easy.

"Your father's choices will catch up with him." It was difficult to portray, but her mother actually tried. For one fleeting moment. "Your father never knew when to quit. Got himself tangled. But, he'd rather cut someone else's strings than risk his own."

"How's that, mama?" Evie pushed her head into the kitchen archway, leaning with a melancholic expression. Stared at Mona's back harder. Maybe hoping to see the heart there. No answer came so Evie recalibrated. "Am I like him?"

That got Mona's head turning. She sighed, shut the water off and wiped her red hands.

"You can't think like that, you're perfect just as you are." Mona took Evie's face. Saw her lip wobble like she was a little girl again trying to stay strong after taking a tumble. "You can't be like him, Evie. Not even if you tried."

Evie could have shattered. Not as if they spoke of her father in any length. Frankly, she could be him very easily. Whatever that meant. Something inside her had Mona reeling away. Something there. That must be Jack. Another ghost with no starlight. No sun.

That must be those blinding spots.

"Evie." Mona swallowed. Made peace with this. "My mother. I know I never talk about her."

"No." Evie shifted as the hands came down.

"Your Nana. She had a cold nature. She never loved me, but she sure tried her best." Glassy eyes flickered, panned to focus. "I thought I was born to that cold nature. Until I had you. I didn't know I could ever love something that much at once glance. I spent my entire life terrified I'd never love anything proper, not even your father, until I had you. I hope you realize how easy you are to love."

Evie welled. Teeth clenching to hold the flood back. She needed this. She needed it when Jack walked out. She needed it after a particularly nasty thunder storm twelve years ago. After too many flashes that blinded her.

"You saved me, baby, you did. You made life worth living."

And what would it mean if Evie let her mother down? Would she return to that cold nature? Was that nature carved into Evie as well by a life that crept silently behind her? By ghosts that haunt forever?

"You need to put your head down and dream. Dreaming could do you good." Mona kissed Evie's forehead and went for the cabinet. "Take two of these with water and get into bed. Tomorrow's already a better day."

Nameless pills pushed into her hand. Evie stood there a moment. Watched Mona resume the dishes like nothing had happened. Humming a sweet lullaby to herself. *Flash.*

Evie swallowed the pills dry. Swallowed something after them that she shouldn't have. A marble colored all amethyst. *Crystallize*, she begged, *don't let me die too*. Made a bed inside her closet. Patted her cheek as she cried silently until sleep stole her away without mercy.

** ** *

"Late this morning." Evie remarked. Breaking the seal on silence when Billy joined their friend's table. The air was just barely warm enough for some students to wander the outside area during lunch.

"Last minute doctor thing. I drove Max and Susan. Dad had work. Harrington got you here in one piece. He gets points for that." Billy

plopped down without food, lip barely quirking.

“How is Max?” Steve dug into a bag of chips; noticing Evie wasn’t touching her lunch either, he pushed the bag into her hand. “Eat something.”

“Quiet. Staying in sick today, but she’s going tomorrow.” Billy flexed his knuckles. “Slept in my room last night. Scared the shit out of me at 3AM.”

No one laughed. A crisp wind blew carefully over them.

“Hope they find the dipshit. Small town.” Tommy remarked. “Maybe the Chief will give us a turn.”

“They won’t.” Billy peered at Evie nibbling on tasteless chips. “Won’t find him. Max just has to move on. Useless talking about it.”

“Billy.” Heather came in softly. Not trying to chide because they knew he didn’t mean it coldly. “We’ll just do our best to offer anything she needs. Don’t let her shut down though.”

“I don’t control the sister, princess.” Billy gawked at the muffin Tommy settled in front of him. Carol added a banana.

“Just eat something.” It wasn’t a request.

Billy gave Carol this look like he was gonna fight it and picked up the muffin first. Went down in hard chunks but it was something. They puttered through the day. Felt like it might be dragging. Evie buttoned a denim jacket up at her locker and snuck out at the usual time.

“Riding with me or Harrington?” Billy met her around the next corner.

“I’d like to go with you if you’ll have me. Steve’s got a thing. So does Heather. Tommy and Carol left already and walking doesn’t sound as refreshing as it usually does.” Evie felt for his hand and Billy didn’t snatch away. A sigh left before he was walking so Evie followed.

“How are you, Billy?” She asked in the car. He shrugged, peering with a funny look. “I don’t think it’s been asked.”

“I’m fine. Max is the one you should be asking.” He sped off.

“I can ask you too. You’re her family and my...something.”

“Just...thinking about how small I thought this damn town was and now it feels huge. Someone hiding in it was trying to mess with kids. Wasn’t the first.” He glanced at Evie and she got chills. “Hell, could be some fucking tourist just passing through. When my dad isn’t the only fucker I have to worry about...it annoys me.”

Slowing, she took his hand again over the center console. Wove their fingers together. Evie brought his arm up to kiss each fingertip. Soothing.

“My dad took a double shift. Won’t be home till way late. Probably to be away from the house.” Billy remarked, turning a corner.

“He’s taking pages from my Mom’s book. The girl who closes today is sick so Mom’s staying to watch her shop till late. I’m on my own for dinner. She made a pie for your family, it’s in the fridge.”

“Aw, look at you inviting yourself over.” Billy pulled up to his house, pausing to finish half of a smoke he left in his ashtray this morning.

“Wanna check on Max and spend time with you. Sue me. Pie is the way to your neighbor’s heart. It’s chocolate cream.” Her voice lingered to persuade him.

“Tell Mona I prefer a juicy peach pie. Better yet, angel cake.” Billy added suggestively. Evie whipped her head at him to make that scrunchy face, arms crossing.

“Pervert. I don’t have to stay, I can just deliver the pie.” Evie smiled that time. “Mom asked me specifically to hand it over.”

“I just said that my dad is working late.” Billy opened his door to sweep the cigarette across the street. “I think it’s pretty obvious I don’t want you to leave.”

"I don't find it obvious what you want." Evie replied quieter, catching Billy's eyes as he tilted back to study her.

A hand curled behind her neck, pushing their foreheads together before Evie slipped her arms around his shoulders. She stole the first kiss. Crushing his lips until Billy muffled a sound into her.

"Evie." He murmured there, pecking her again. Hands pushing into the small of her back. "I want you to bring the damn pie over. Make nice. Visit Max. We'll tell some lie so I can get you into my room alone. Susan will invite you for dinner and you'll have to say yes. We'll eat that pie and then I'll eat your pie again and again. Obvious enough?"

"Hmm. Maybe." Evie played with his blond curls, tucking them back so she could pepper his cheeks and jaw in more kisses. Smelling and tasting of her strawberry chapstick because makeup was a task this morning. "Not if I eat you first." She nibbled on his ear. Felt a thrill remembering her earring was still in the opposite lobe. "Give me five minutes to feed the cat and grab dessert."

"Bring your backpack when you come back over." Billy didn't elaborate and watched Evie sneak out of his car to hurry up to her house. Blue was yelling for her at the door. Pawing for affection so Evie plucked the kitten up to rush around.

"Behave yourself. Try climbing the new cat tree we built you." Evie scratched the fuzzy chin. Got the kitten purring louder. "Starting to grow, Blue Bear." Evie freshened up, grabbed her backpack again, got the pie, and locked the door to go out. She carried the chilled tin up to the Hargrove house and knocked. Billy let Susan grab the door. A smile crossed.

"Evie."

"Hi, my mom made this in the morning for Max. Well, for all of you. Chocolate cream pie, cause she thinks it's best for teens. It's her special recipe." Evie pushed it out.

"Looks delicious. We're having my famous grilled cheese and tomato soup. Max's favorite. Did you want to stay for dinner? Looks

like Mona's out." Susan craned to see the Fenny driveway.

"She'll stay." Billy appeared from thin air. "We got stuck together for an AP bio project."

"Fancy that," Susan only smiled again, "come on in, Evie. Max is in her room. She'll be happy to see you." The mother shifted back to let Evie inside, returning to the kitchen to prep and set the pie away.

"I'll take this." Billy snatched Evie's backpack off. "Max is waiting." Evie followed the hallway to knock on the ajar door.

"Come in." Max peeked up from her spot on the bed. Brightening noticeably so Evie pushed the door shut and crossed. Thin arms opened and brown eyes hid surprise before Evie crawled up to embrace the smaller girl. Kissing her head, red hair was damp from a recent shower.

"Hey, how are you? I stayed with Billy at the hospital, but you were out the whole time."

"Neil told me. You and El are my only friends he doesn't hate that much." Max set a Wonder Woman comic aside, curling up in a big pair of pjs. "Thanks. I don't...remember a whole lot."

"You don't have to, ah-"

"No, they told me you found me." Max pushed up on her knees. Hands clasping. "I went out because I was annoyed with everything. Neil and all. Wanted to go sulk alone by the car for a sec and someone just picked me up from behind. He was tall, I couldn't see his face but I started kicking. I heard a car door open and I just freaked. Bit him hard so he threw me, maybe panicking cause I made all that noise. It felt like maybe he didn't have a plan or anything."

"Just saw you there and..." Evie trailed off as Max nodded.

"Hit my head pretty hard." Max frowned and rubbed a sore spot. "What if he was there for another little girl and I was just in the way? He was there for something."

"Why do you think that?"

“He said something weird.” Max swallowed. “I didn’t tell anyone. He said, *I can’t control it.*”

“Like? Himself, you think?” Evie shifted so Max could settle into her side. “Strange... I’m so sorry, Max. It shouldn’t have happened.”

“When I got my first period last year, mom gushed about how I was becoming a woman. Still felt like a little kid until that moment I heard my shirt rip. I liked that shirt, too. We got it at this fair on the boardwalk back in Cali. My real dad won it for me.” Max shrugged and peeked up. “It’s like he tore the little kid out of me, Evie.”

“You’re safe. Billy and I both are gonna keep you safe.” Evie held her closer. Made promises. “You can always talk to me. You have so many friends who love you. They stayed up to ask me how you were doing, you know? Just keep those good friends close, Max, you’ll make it out of this.”

“Can I keep hanging out with you, Heather, and Carol?”

“Always. We love you.” Evie flashed a smile and Max beamed up at her. “Don’t try to grow up too fast. I did and I regret it.” She wiped a tear from the splotchy freckled cheek. “Have some fun. Make mistakes and get better. Don’t beat yourself up.”

Max gave this solemn nod.

“Billy’s probably waiting in his room to make out with you.”

Evie broke to laugh.

“He can wait.” She insisted. “My mom made a pie. Chocolate dream to be honest, you’ll like it.”

“Thanks, I didn’t eat much today.” Max picked up her comic. “I was at a good part so you can go to Billy.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“Just for right now. I’ll give him shit about being a boyfriend later though.”

"That's my girl." Evie winked, tucking Max's red hair aside. "We'll hang out this week. Just be easy on yourself. You haven't done anything wrong." A nod followed as Evie pushed up to leave her in peace. "Max, you know you're easy to love, right?"

Bright eyes blinked in question.

"I...I hope so." Max replied, unsure of what to do with it. Evie hesitated and pushed to go out.

She heard Susan running the vacuum in the living room and crossed back to Billy's room, pushing the door further open. Def Leppard reeled from the boom box across the way.

"Thought I was going to do this entire project myself." Came his quip. Billy didn't turn from his lazy spot on the beaten couch, flicking a book up on the table to kick back. "You gonna lock that and come sit in my lap, or what?"

"Oh, so forward." Evie teased, clicking the knob to come around. Billy grasped her hips. Ushering her to fall forward into him.

"We have an hour to fill before dinner." Fingers popped the button on her jeans. Evie smoothed her hands over the warm cotton of his red tee. Tangerine light filtered between his makeshift curtains and blinds. Gave the room a sunset glow. Evie felt the heat on her back and curls.

Billy's hand lifted to cup her face. Threading dark locks back between his fingers. The free hand slipped under her shirt, earning a tiny shudder.

"Just wanna see you while we still have light left." Billy pulled her sweater up. Evie felt her breath hitch. Let his hands knead and explore her skin. Blue eyes held her steady.

"Let me see you, Evie." He uttered quieter. Blushed in the cheeks, she shifted around. Let him undress her all the way down. Peeling her layers intimately. Roses blooming wide and gorgeous. Still clothed, Billy just admired her. The lasting sun made her glow all ethereal there. She shifted to straddle his lap again.

Evie let him see her. Allowed his eyes to behold all of her. Hands roaming.

“Billy?” She caught him looking up in this daze. Stars in his baby blues. Evie made this motion to cover herself and instead grasped at his shirt. Fisting the wrinkled fabric. Hair fell over her breasts. “Am I ugly?”

“No.” He hummed and brought her closer, lips opened but they didn’t touch yet. Just shared the space intimately.

“When I was young, I thought I was and...” Evie ghosted her lips against his. “And I just go back there a lot. I was a lonely kid even when I was with friends. Felt like I was waiting to transform, I used to stand at my mirror naked and I’d pull my hair and get so mad. I’d tell myself, you can’t be ugly. You have to be pretty. And the girl there, she wouldn’t change magically. Sometimes I still catch myself wanting to stomp my feet about it. I feel torn. I know I should love myself. Some days I think I do. I feel...this thrill about me. Too many people tell me it's wrong to love...all of this.”

Billy hushed her fears back with lingering kisses. Slow as can be to make the point. Hot breaths came together. Mouths opening for more. Deeper.

“You’re pretty.” He mumbled, kissing her lips. Her cheeks. Her jawline. Her temple. Evie clung to let him preen and paw. Billy kept saying it like a wish. A prayer. A promise. “You’re pretty, Evie. So, so pretty...”

Evie let herself wane down into him. She pushed back. Kissed the hollow of Billy’s tense throat, suckled to leave a mark before he could do the same to her. Flesh slipped down him. Feeling too vulnerable with him clothed.

Fingers pushed his shirt up to worship the taut skin. Billy had this loose grip on her forearms, legs opening so Evie could settle between them. Wordlessly, she opened his pants. Billy moaned low under the music. Tiny, slick kisses worked up the length of him. All lips and tongue.

Billy's head fell back. He called her an angel. *His angel*. Caressed her cheek with light, auspicious fingers. One hand twisted her hair out of the way as his hips began to work up into her throat. Evie stayed there, mouth stretched over his shaft. Massaging his thighs. Making little obscene sounds when she began to move with him. Gold, wiry hair tickled her nose. Immersed in his thick cologne.

"Evie." Billy cursed her. Praised her. Too divine for words. He tugged gently on her rope of hair, craning her neck back so he could lean forward to slip his tongue back into her mouth. Loving that she tasted of his own sex. Hands cupped her face so they locked hazy eyes. "Get back up here."

Evie crawled up into his lap, adjusting to mount him and sink down until she felt too full. Spine arching to let her moan flutter away. Billy pulled her all the way into him. Held Evie like she might just float off. They whimpered in sync, wrapped around each other to move.

Wet, fleshy sounds seemed so distant. Evie tightened her arms around his shoulders, felt his muscles clenching as she buried her face into his neck. Praising him right back. Sun filled the room.

They climbed high together. Rocking. Beginning to quake and gasp. Billy pushed her to release first. Overstimulated her frame to pieces until he was bucking to follow. Euphoria set. Evie squirmed a little and got her hips pushed back down. Taking him deep. Still clenching.

"Stay here, you're so warm." Billy kissed a line across her shoulder. He hushed her. Soothed her. Evie melted again. Kept him safe with her naked body. "You're warm, Evie." He whispered again, fingertips drawing up Evie's spine and back down. She closed her eyes. Total peace and quiet there. Just floating with him. Billy kept drawing these shapes into Evie's back.

"Feels like you're writing on me." She purred, nudged up into his neck to sigh. Unworried about her weight on him. "Tell me a secret about you."

"A secret?" He chuckled quietly.

“Yeah, anything. Something not many people know.”

“I am,” he began with thought, “deathly afraid of jellyfish.”

“Not sharks.” Evie trailed her lips up Billy’s cheek, nuzzled her nose into his before drawing out to see the expression gentling his face.

“I can handle sharks, you just give them a hard bop in the nose and they run crying.” He grinned. “Can’t punch my way through jellyfish. Had a dead one float up on shore once during a family beach day and I screamed. Max loved it.”

“No jellyfish. Got it.” Evie contemplated it for a moment. “I can’t sing Etta James on stage without crying.”

“Etta gets you?”

“Yeah, I can enjoy her music any day of the week. Sing along in the car. But if you make me perform her songs, I’ll cry and cry my heart out.” Evie hummed, tilting to curl up into him. Still filled to the brim. Not wanting to leave this moment. “Can’t pinpoint why, it just gets me.”

“Got it. I’ll stand by with tissues.” Billy shifted his chin atop her head. Evie wondered briefly if he kept his clothing on to hide fresh bruises and kissed his chest. Inhaling into cotton.

“You smell so good. I don’t even care about the smoker stuff.”

“You give great head, I’ll cut down on the cigarettes if you stick around more like this.” He mused, causing Evie to break with genuine laughter.

“I’d stress smoke my mother under the table if I could. Have to protect the voice.” Evie sat up, touching her throat. Billy eyed her breasts and sighed. “My mom hides packs in really obvious places. I resist the urge.”

“You’re such a good girl, aren’t you? What’s the secret? Got a vice you’re hiding from me, Evie?” Billy cupped one tit to thumb her hard nipple. Sensitive, Evie moaned silently.

Eyes clouding up again. She felt this chill in her spine. Went all the way up to her brain. There was a secret from Billy she felt she could never share.

What would he think of her?

"I'm all virtue, Billy." Evie bit her lip, feeling his mouth open against her chest. Wetter kisses and nips had her whining for more. Swaying idly into him.

"All virtue, Evangeline? I'm sure there's a vice deep inside you right now." He purred, filling out again. "Feel that?" Hips rocked up to tease. Evie hissed. "Want more?"

She made a muffled sound up into the air.

"Speak up, Angel." He grasped her hips, pushing Evie back into him. "Use that pretty voice you care so much about. Tell me what you want. Pretty girl like you should get exactly what she wants."

"Yes." She swallowed. "Want more." Evie tilted her head into his, got low. "I just want to be your vice, Billy. Maybe that's it."

"I like the sound of it." Muscles tensed, he twisted to drop her back into the couch. Still inside. Still connected. "I think you got another orgasm in you, sweetheart. Wanna feel you shake." He said it with this hint of menace. Teasing kisses on her neck and chest.

Evie dug her teeth into his shoulder, lips opening to feel him rock with shallow thrusts. Working himself back up. Legs wrapped around his hips. Evie held him close, let her fingernails scratch at his taut back. Cramped into the little loveseat, they bucked together. Moaning soft and sweet. Swaying to a distant shore.

"I want you, Billy." Evie became a vice around his body. Protecting it. She tried not to giggle at the girlish thought. "You. Just miles and piles of you." He groaned in turn, rocking harder.

She made a strangled cry, grasping desperately at him.

"Am I hurting you, Eves?" Billy puffed, lifting to see her eyes. Evie cupped his face, head shaking. Like it was forever a foolish notion.

“No,” she sank with him, “you feel perfect.”

Billy thrust into her, shifting the couch. They hoped it wasn't louder than his music. Evie curled up on a cloud. Fredrick never asked her that. Fredrick knew he hurt and wouldn't stop. Billy displayed this rare vulnerability in his eyes. Claimed her mouth. Sought solace in Evie.

It felt like such an easy thing to give back.

** ** *

“Fen, can you escape the sex coma for two seconds to focus here?” Carol hissed on the way to AP Bio. The one period she had with all her friends. Besides lunch. “You're honeymooning again.”

“Shut up.” Evie playfully gave her a push, leaning to see the sketchbook in Carol's hand. Photos glued to each page with notes. Nail art. “Jesus, Care, you're getting better and better. Making us all look bad.”

“My goal in life.” A wink. Students wandered around them. “Your mom thought so too.”

“My mom? When did you talk to my mom?”

“I told you, I got my hair done last weekend. We chatted for like two hours, she even had some interest in maybe letting me help pamper ladies who visit. Mani-pedis. Make the experience classier. Boost business with the mall. I'm gonna work at a high end spa one day, she even mentioned connections in the city. Your mom is so cool.” Carol flicked pages, missing Evie's eyes shift.

“Oh? Yeah... That's cool. You guys chatted.”

“We have a lot in common. I was a child beauty queen until my mom ruined her life. Mona wanted to hear all about it though. The nail place on main is closing because of the mall, it's moving in.”

“Yeah, my mom's been approached about that. She likes her shop too much to give in yet.” Evie cleared her throat.

“Gonna visit your mom’s salon this week, she said stop by anytime to chat more about it. I figure I’ll work at the mall this summer, but extra time in a nice salon can help too.”

“You and my mom....friends. Huh.” Evie figured Carol had a void to fill and Mona was happy to be that as well. Something about it gnawed. She couldn’t get her mother to sit still these days for her. Not with that conversation after the hospital.

“If...If you don’t like it, I can-”

“No! No, it’s fine. Just new.” Evie laughed, eyes elsewhere. “You probably have more in common with my mother than I do if you believe it.”

Carol was the pretty, popular beauty queen Mona dreamed of raising.

“Figure you’re getting the Hargrove beef injection often, so you’re busy these days.”

“Someone need injecting?” Billy swept up behind them, pulling Evie into his side while she jumped.

“My girl can’t focus because she’s daydreaming about you!” Carol reached over Evie to push Billy’s chest.

“That’s how I like her.” He teased.

“I am not daydreaming about anyone.” Evie went red. “I’m just trying to make it to April here, guys.”

“They’re putting up prom flyers for May, Billy. Better ask your girl before someone else does.” Carol hurried forward to catch up with Tommy. Steve and Heather waved at the door, going in as the bell began to ring.

Evie took a seat at a high table between Billy and Heather. Steve, Carol, and Tommy at the table behind them. Their teacher was running late so chatter picked up.

“Do...” Billy grimaced. “Did you really want to go to prom?”

“I...um-”

“Billy, are you really asking her like that, hoping she’ll say no?” Heather leaned toward them. Billy made a face.

“I asked it normally.”

“It’s senior prom, you big ape, of course she wants to go.”

“Guys.” Evie hushed. “Our group has been bickering about prom all this week.”

“You’ve had to sit through a million prom-posals while the ex-king meathead you’re dating twiddles his thumbs.” Heather prodded.

“I just think the whole thing is a waste.” Billy blurted out. Heather hissed at him.

“No, duh, but you suck it up for your girl. Show her a nice time. How does Tommy understand that and you don’t?”

“Tommy asked Carol to prom by writing the words on his naked chest and running through Yearbook in his tighty-whities.”

“Saw his baguette.” Evie muttered, haunted with wide eyes.

“And that was more romantic than what you and your monkey brain have accomplished this week.” Came Heather’s retort.

“Guys, please stop talking like I’m not sitting between you.” Evie’s eyes rolled back before she rubbed her temples.

Heather and Billy gestured heatedly behind Evie’s back with annoyed glances. A sigh.

“It’s just not my thing.” He shifted his seat closer to Evie’s as Heather opened her folder with a slap. Brown eyes peered up at him. Betraying everything. “You want to go to it?”

“I just thought, it’s my last year. I should get the full high school experience with my friends.” Evie tapped her pencil eraser into her palm, shrugging. “Might be nice to dress up and feel beautiful like

Cinderella for a night.”

Billy frowned at her. Didn't say what he was thinking.

“If you don't want to go, it's whatever. It's fine.” She crossed her arms, face ahead. Too nice about it. Heather shot Billy a look to tell him he was blowing this. Blue eyes rolled in return.

“Evie-”

“Class!” Their teacher entered, shrugging on an apron. “Sorry, I'm late, had to get our special guests for today's lesson.”

Evie's back shot straight up at the sound. Overlapping echoing croaks from a cart being pulled in. Her blood chilled.

“No...” She looked to Heather. “Was that today?”

“We all forgot.” Heather touched her lips, frowning deeper. Billy observed Evie tremor, breath quickening as groans followed the class.

“Yes, yes. It's dissection day. Moved it because I know how many of you like to conveniently skip.” Their droning teacher was passing jars around with loose lids. Bleating green frogs chirping around inside each. Evie leaned out from the table.

“No, no, no.” She whimpered to herself. Hands clenching to her mouth.

“Hey, Evie, it's okay. Just don't look. I'll get you through this.” Heather rubbed her back and Evie shook her head. Billy peered around, panning back to Evie panicking silently next to him. “She doesn't want to watch them die and cut them.”

Billy stared, not saying anything. Sun and wind picked up the trees outside. Spring reigning anew. Evie bopped her foot up and down, picking up the jar to see the somber creature inside. Eyes watering.

“I can't do this.” She whispered. “Poor things.” Their teacher came around with cotton balls soaked in chemicals. Popping one in each jar as students grumbled about it.

"It'll take a little while. You don't have to watch." He recited, making his way to the front table. Evie snatched her jar away. "Miss Fenny. This is mandatory."

"I can't kill it." She shook her head, almost as a child would. "I don't feel good."

"I had whiners in every class, but they dealt with it. I don't excuse students from my lessons. You'll get over this. It's for a grade."

"It's needless murder." Evie snapped back, near tears. "I feel sick, I can't." Frogs sang all behind her.

"Miss Fenny-"

"Sir, I got it." Billy peeped up, eyes shifting to Evie. "I'll do it for you." He wrestled the jar from Evie's hands.

"No, please-"

"Evie, just let nature take its course." Billy's lip quirked. He opened the jar's lid, offering it out to the teacher. "Here we go."

A loud croak picked up before Billy's wrist jerked. One swoop to let the frog hop out.

"Mr. Hargrove!"

"Whoops. Butterfingers, sir. I should have stuck with basketball." Billy shrugged. Evie's jaw fell open. Playing it up, Billy knocked his jar over with it. Another frog bounding out. "Ah, shit, must be a sign, sir!" Their teacher ungracefully tried to catch both frogs, missing when they launched off the table.

Laughter picked up.

Billy stole Heather's frog next. Sweeping it out.

"Run for your life, little man! Back to the river!" Billy cackled there. Almost unhinged. He peered at Evie's expression. Noticed she wasn't crying anymore. "It's mutiny! I wanna save you!"

He was turning leftover jars on the cart while their teacher was distracted. Frogs dancing every which way.

“Hell yeah, mutiny!” Tommy howled with amusement to join. He stole Carol’s jar as she fell into Steve laughing before they let their frogs go.

Following Billy’s example, the entire class was in chaos, releasing frogs and pushing the side door and windows open to let them free. Even went for the jars of waiting animals on the packed cart.

“That’s enough of this!” Their teacher went ignored. “Let me handle it!”

At least a hundred frogs were ushered out in heaps. Hopping all over the classroom. One boy shrieked and fell from his chair.

Billy sparking some movement as if he was the damn messiah. Evie giggled in her seat, plucked up a frog to join the crusade as students raced around. Frogs sang together and piled out into the fresh dewy grass outside.

“The fuzz!” Tommy echoed out when the school’s security guard was jogging up toward the room. Frantic to avoid the little green creatures escaping to freedom.

Wind whipped through the side door as Evie let her frog free, laughing when a hand tugged at her wrist. Spinning around, she crashed into Billy’s chest before he planted a truly romantic kiss upon her lips. Somewhere in a dream, an orchestra picked up for them.

“Evie, when I get out of prison,” Billy lifted a frog in his free hand, “will you swear on this ugly fucker you’ll go to the damn prom with me?”

She laughed a bright and beautiful sound. Chaos behind him ignored.

“Yes, I will!” She tucked her unruly curls aside. Billy was grabbed by the arm so he pushed the frog into Evie’s waiting hands.

“Wait for me, Miss Bennet!” He called as he was pulled away,

twisting around.

"I'll wait forever, Mr. Darcy!" Evie granted back. Full of those glittering luna moths and pure sunlight.

"Hey man, you think I won't make my new green friends attack you? I am their god! Let me go, piggy!" Billy had students howling cheers after him as he was escorted to the front office. Evie's foot shifted in a hazy fit of romance as a final round of slick frogs bounded past her legs.

"You too, Miss Fenny. Office now. They'll deal with you." Their teacher pointed.

"Aw, nuts." Evie shrugged, petting the frog in her hand.

"Mr. Hagen, don't think I didn't notice your part. Go!"

"Let's go, Keg King." Tommy pecked Carol's cheek and swept an arm behind Evie so they left together. Frogs sounded all over the grass outside. "Did you see his face?"

"I did. Ready to blow. He might be taking time off after that." Evie smacked a kiss near her frog's head and released him with the rest. "Maybe we'll get detention together at least."

The school called Chief Hopper in.

He did a double-take when the situation was actually explained.

"You're telling me...I'm here because the class released some frogs?" He sounded out slowly, already settling his hat back on. Billy, Evie, and Tommy were all failing to hide snickers behind him. Squished together on a couch.

"It was...school property, sir." The principal tried.

"Frogs." Hopper droned. "Does anyone in this town know what warrants police involvement?"

"You could be catching, Big Ben, the opossum right now." Billy sniggered. Jim grumbled something that wasn't PG.

"If you hurry, sir, you might be able to catch them on the way to Lover's Lake." Evie piped up. Billy and Tommy both snorted and had to hide in her shoulders. Buried in curls. Jim whipped around, already biting his lip. "I think," she held giggles in, "they were singing 'Rainbow Connection.' You can still catch them, Ch-...Chief Hopper."

More laughter from her curls.

"Thank you, Evangeline." He replied flatter.

"Protect and serve, sir." She paused. "It's my fault. I didn't want to kill the frogs and I started crying. Billy and Tommy were just trying to help."

Hopper sighed, facing the principal again with his hands on his belt.

"I was called in here because that squirrely teacher tried to make a teenage girl kill a frog to the point of tears?" He recited evenly. "That's why I'm here?"

"Uh...we're sorry we bother you, Chief." Their nervous principal winced.

"Yeah. I thought so. Tommy, Billy, Evie. You three go on home. Don't interfere in anymore frog affairs."

"Ain't easy being green, sir." Billy flicked a lazy salute. Hopper hurried off but his chuckles sounded down the hallway. The three shuffled out to go to the parking lot.

"Tommy!" Carol raced down to jump into his arms for an impromptu make-out. "Are you okay, baby? Did they hurt you in there?" Tongues mashed.

"It was rough, but I made it back to you, honey bunny." They continued the lip lock.

"Jesus, he was gone like an hour, Care." Steve passed. "You three serving any time?"

"Chief laughed in their faces about it. Probably should have handled it in house." Billy shrugged, hand slipping around Evie's hip. Heather crossed her arms.

"Not the worst prom-posal." She decided. The school bell rang. Sixth period letting out as the middle school emptied.

"Warm my heart, princess." Billy winked, looking around for Max who was already jogging up the hill with her skateboard in hand.

"You guys know anything about some frogs around the schools today?"

Laughter followed the teens and Billy nodded toward his waiting Camaro.

"Long story, shitbird."

"He asked Evie to prom." Heather shrugged and Billy whipped to puff at her. Max's battered face brightened up. A scrape on her chin and healing bruise along her temple.

"Aww," she gushed. Thriving at Billy's freckles tinting pink. "He did, huh?"

"I swear to God, Max."

Evie had passed the group in a dream to follow the pulling wind up the hill further. Head tilting to see the clouds pass. Budding cherry blossom trees shed a swirl of pale pink petals. Falling to paint all around her. Evie laughed to herself, hands lifting to let a few kiss her palms and fingertips. One day in the sun felt so worth it today.

"See you guys later," Steve winked at Billy caught in Evie's bright silhouette. Pretty petals dancing in the glow for her. The group dispersed as Max shoved her brother forward to go to his girl. Evie shook some petals from her curls and turned to see Billy's eyes there.

"Going to prom means dancing, you know." Evie stole his hand, still dreaming. "That's all I want. I just wanna dance with you." She lifted his arm to spin under it, swooning. "It's not so bad. Promise."

Max swept her eyes between the couple. Realized what Evie meant about how easy some people were to love. For a beat, she thought she saw this neon red glow emit from Billy's chest and disperse all at once.

Eyes shifted to her friends at Jonathan's car across the way. Lucas already looking back. Lips lifted and they both waved idly. Max peered back quickly.

Billy scoffed a little, letting Evie go to snatch his jacket collar up. Reminding the world he was too cool for this all. Max pushed between them to steal Evie.

"C'mon, it's perfect skate weather for us."

"You're right," Evie had giggled, going to Billy's car until he caught up.

"Hey, I had dibs."

"Dibs go to the little sister." Max asserted. "You can pretend to work on your car or something and watch." Evie touched her lips to snicker so Billy got his car open, huffing about it as he plopped in. Sun rays pulled through the glass while the windows came out. Illuminated Evie's expression. She watched the trees rain.

Knowing she's remember this exact moment and how happy she was. Billy stole her hand across the console and pulled the Camaro out. Evie caught his stunning profile and smiled again.

"What?" He spied her there as Max buckled in back.

"Nothing." Evie turned quickly away to watch the roads. "Just happy. It's a good day."

They didn't look at each other. Didn't need to. Billy wove their fingers together in response. Sped up down a lone road to let wind cast into the car before he turned some music on. Evie leaned her free arm up in the window to sigh, settling her chin there to allow brown curls to fly free.

Knew that whatever came next, today, she was happy.

And that made it easy to love.

Notes for the Chapter:

Another huge thank you for reading. Again, I'm pulling away from tumblr for my own safety and for the better of the community. All comments and kudos are loved.

I hope you feel comfortable leaving words and interacting with me below. I'd love to talk about my chapter. Thanks xoxo.

22. Rust and Stardust

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone!! The return we've all dreaded. Warning for Fredrick Bullshit. Just also gonna say the way he returns is Ugly. Pica//mention of aftermath. Billy & Evie get help from a friend.

April 1985

"Great set tonight, baby." Iris flicked an envelope out to Evie's waiting hand. "Rest of the month is slim and so is May, but I have plenty of summer hours for you. That's for certain now."

Evie bit her lip, giddy.

"Really?"

"You paid dues. Day and night hours as the city comes alive again. Lots of parties. Bigger drag events in need of hosts. I need help keeping my queens together if you can lend a backstage hand too." Iris leaned over the bar. "You tell your mother?"

"Ah, when summer picks up. I'm still technically her receptionist even though she's given me no hours. Keeps saying I need to enjoy my senior year." Air blew out her lips, flipping a few curls up. Iris didn't look up from her clipboard as she counted bottles and took notes.

"She got a new man?"

"I don't know. She dates here and there. Parties. Why?"

"Divorced mamas get strange on their kids when they have something new that gets serious. She's in that stage of not wanting to bring two worlds together, but running out of reasons not to at this point. My mother did the same thing, of course not much came as a surprise to her when I came out." Iris smiled. "She knew for years and immediately began altering her old dresses for me."

False lashes winked, sultry.

“Ugh, I can’t think about my mother dating. She’s brought home duds on rare occasions who didn’t cut out fast enough.” Evie perked to see Billy at a table putting a cigarette out while the band played on.

“You shouldn’t keep your Eros waiting, go on home. I’ll call if more hours present themselves. Take care until next week, sweets.” Iris tipped Evie’s chin up. “And kick ass the rest of your senior year. It flies by.”

“I will, Iris. Billy and I are going to prom. May 25th.” Evie hadn’t even told her mother. Sometimes Iris felt like more of a mom than Mona did. All her advice and warmth. Her easy breezy acceptance.

“I’ll make sure you have that weekend open.” Iris swept some curls from Evie’s shoulder. “Need anything, I’m here. Especially hair and makeup tips. I never went to my prom and I wish I did. You deserve a good night.”

“I’ll probably need the help, I’d like that. Thank you, Iris. I, uh, I mean it. Hey, I see you later though.” Evie turned to Billy already there with a jacket. Iris glittered watching them go off. His denim eased over her shoulders before they were leaving up the steps.

“Not cold tonight,” he remarked, eyes on the moon glimmering, “got time to fool around in the backseat? I have a new blanket back there to break in.”

“Oh, tempting,” Evie giggled and got into the car, “still tired from what we did in that church confessional during the Easter party.”

“Our best work. You knew better than to bring me around a church.” Billy chuckled, speeding out as Evie fussed with the radio. She settled in and peered at the lipstick kiss on the sleeve of his jacket. A smile crossed.

“How’s Max?”

“Still sneaking into my room from time to time when I’m not with you. Little shit kicks in her sleep. She doesn’t really talk about it

anymore,” he shrugged, exhaling. “Dad’s been working and drinking himself to sleep so, not really bothering with us unless we get in his way of a cold six pack.”

“Ah.” Evie felt for his hand. “Still being distant from friends?”

“Yearning for the Sinclair boy clearly and hiding it.”

“She’ll find her way back to them some more. Time will pass. Summer might be a nice change. I hope so.” Evie leaned back to see the stars twinkle as they charged toward Hawkins. “As long as she doesn’t shut them out all together.”

“Not like she has a choice when I drop her at the arcade and kick her out of the car.” Billy’s lips lifted.

“Just being a supportive big brother, huh?”

“I’m learning.” He turned off the freeway after some time. They fell into an easy silence for a few beats. Music soft from the radio.

“I told Susan. About us.” Billy piped up, earning an awed look from Evie. “Frankly, I think she’s known the whole time.”

“My mom sometimes pushes the subject when she’s around. Me seeing a boy.” Evie cocked her head. “Why Susan?”

“Cause I realized I’m gonna need help with the whole rental tux thing for May.” He laughed. “Plus, she found your horrible cat sweater in my laundry.”

“I wondered where that went.” Evie touched her lips. “Sorry.”

“Whoever created that knit monster should apologize.” Billy snickered when he got pushed for that one.

“Don’t knock the cats, they’re soft. You love my bad taste in campy prints.” Evie tilted her chin up. Pride. “We’ll watch the clothing we leave at each other’s house.”

“Yeah, yeah. She was too peppy about the whole thing.” He blew air out his lips. “Started rattling about prom traditions and I had to

sit there and listen to a bunch of her high school stories. Total music geek like you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, she played like a million instruments, I guess.” Billy paused. “Happiest I’ve seen here in the time we knew each other was her talking about that.”

“She must miss it.” Evie shrugged. “Music. I know I would. I’d end up face down in a ditch.”

“Still waiting to bring up the summer contest to Mona?”

“Yeah, I can’t even think about it right now.” Evie let a shuddered breath go. “The timing has to be absolutely perfect to get that yes. It’s at the end of summer. I have time.”

“Right.” Billy craned to see the road ahead while they found their way back to Cherry.

“Shit.” Evie was against the window when they arrived back at her house. “My mother has a man over. I locked my bedroom, she probably thinks I’m sleeping. Hell.” An unfamiliar car sat in the drive next to Mona’s. Shiny red Plymouth. “Hate that stupid make,” she muttered. “Iris was right, she always is. I know my mom’s hiding her dates, they never get serious.”

“Sleep at my place?” Swerved to park around back of his dark house.

“No, we’ll definitely get caught. I’ll sneak in my bedroom window and hope they’re out so I can hit the bathroom. Usually these creeps are gone before sunrise. Ugh, she doesn’t bring many home, they go to their place. Must have been a rager they hit.”

“I could keep you company.” Billy drew his hand up her tight-clad thigh. Evie swept around for a kiss.

“Back seat offer still open?” She mumbled, unbuckling.

“Always is.” He nudged and pushed her by the hips into the back

before he was joining.

"What if your parents wake up?"

"No lights," Billy dropped into her body. "Kiss me, Eves, you're killing me in that dress." Hands drew up rough sapphire sequins. The moon illuminating her without streetlamps in darkness. "You look like a star. A vision in blue."

"Oh, I do?" Evie's lipstick smeared red on him, arms winding to bring Billy against her. "You've said that before. Not that I'm tired of it."

Cramped together, Billy pushed her dress up and lowered. Face between her thighs the moment he shimmied her hose and panties off. Fingers grasped for his curls at the feel of stubble scratching tender skin.

"Billy, come..." Evie moaned for him. "Come back up here." Hot kisses melted them together before he was thrusting. Rocking together slowly with their fingers lacing. Utterly bringing down every star they could touch.

Evie cursed him softly and begged for another kiss that was granted. Light spatters of spring rain hit the car. Blurring the world apart. Fog covered the windows until Evie's desperate hand shot out to swatch across the dew. Leaving a mark with her sharp cry. Billy had followed her into the same fog. He put his head on her chest. Heard the pulse thump and let her cradle his shaken frame this time.

"I trust you," she uttered. Kissing his crown of gold curls until he came up. Lips parted for his tongue. Billy kissed her drunkenly. Came out with sparkling blues. "I just wanted to say that because it means something to me."

"I trust you, Eves." Lips twitched into a lazier grin then edged her jaw again. "Prettiest angel in Indiana." Billy's nose nuzzled at her collar to inhale perfume. Evie giggled lighter. "I think you like being on my arm."

"Please, Billy, you're on mine." She teased, nosing at his cheek

before she kissed him once more. Hands cupped his face. Made him feel like he was floating here. With her. "I gotta get inside soon and so do you."

Billy whined about it but adjusted so they could fix their clothing. Evie felt for her heels and slipped them on. Tucking her undergarments into the denim she'd all but stolen off him.

"I'll see you tomorrow." She took his hand. "Want to help me sneak in the window?"

"I guess." They hurried between the dark houses in shadows. Rain misting their faces. Evie pulled Billy against her. Stole as many kisses as she dared. Hands roaming. She pulled out and saw him there.

"You might be the most beautiful boy I've ever seen, you know that?"

"Might be?" Came the challenge.

"Are." Evie corrected. She swiped the rain from his mouth with one thumb before tasting him again.

"You know it's been over a month. You and me." She mused, arms around his neck. "Us."

"We could hit a movie next weekend. Celebrate."

"Get milkshakes and sneak all sorts of candies in." Evie agreed, pecking his lips. "Drive up to our spot near Lover's Lake and fool around for as long as we want."

"You read my mind. You're so smart, Evie. God, it's fucking hot." Billy cupped her bottom to bring them back together.

"Come summer, it'll be warm enough for that picnic date you promised me." She began to loosen her grip on Billy, shifting to push her window up.

"Hey, hey, no rush." A few more kisses in the dark followed. Billy helped Evie climb into her bed where Blue perked up and went to her litter box in the corner. Evie shifted, hand covering Billy's in the

frame. "Don't you have too many dreams about me now."

"Yeah, yeah. Be careful sneaking back in." She captured his mouth before he could reply. "We'll talk tomorrow."

A wink followed that made her smile bright. Billy's fingers brushed her chin as he slipped away. She waited until he was safe in his room to fall back into bed with the sweetest sigh.

So stupid happy with this boy.

"Oh, but anyone who knows what love is, " she sang to the full and bright moon filling her soul, *"will understand..."*

Evie slept well that night and dreamed.

Dreamed of technicolor clouds and metallic confetti. Dreamed of spinning round and round and round. Skirts flying up like a princess in a fairy tale. Dreamed of warm sand and emerald grass and honey skin and gold spun curls.

Dreamed of Billy with two feather, white wings flocking to caress her. Rose petals that swayed in the wind delicately. Waiting kisses. Billy bending her back as she lay there for a soft kiss of revival. Both of them draped in sheer veils. Waterfalls that sparkled, cascading ripples. The sun meeting the moon like a secret lover. Frogs chirping. Fireflies and luna moths dancing. Shooting stars.

They glittered in Billy's eyes when he came to lie down with her. She kissed him and drew out to see a beach with the sun painted all blush and tangerine. He fell upon the sand with her. Eyes locking. One hand stretched out to cradle and caress her jaw, thumb sweeping the supple cheek.

Evie registered the waves rolling to shore. Felt them rocking closer in rhythm. Thought she heard soft hymns in the distance to underscore the calm waters. Wind sighing far too soft. Evie could have sunk here. Been taken away by the waters so as long as he came with. And Billy would surely join her.

The waves rolled higher. Started to soak their hair and clothing. Rising to fill every space and notch.

Evie saw the shine of Billy's eyes gloss and shut hers. Not wanting to see the flood. What it could mean. She gasped to wake in bed, sending Blue clamoring up into the air.

"Sorry, Blue Bear." She breathed almost like the dream would become a nightmare. "Strange."

A twist in her gut welled hot. Stabbing. The sound her stomach made sent her scrambling out into the bathroom to void whatever she'd eaten that was ready to come out. Evie went for her gloves and saw spots of red.

Fuck. Her stomach was still twisting unpleasantly.

A grim expression crossed her face. Not wanting to know today, she flushed the evidence away and washed her clammy face. Brushed her teeth and wandered out with a stretch. A satisfying crack had her yawning. The clock blinked 9:32am. Blue came to her little dish for food, munching in the corner as Evie plucked a bowl down.

She felt herself swaying still. The strange dream that hoped and haunted. Billy caressing her face. A hand lifted to recall the moment, patting her cheek as she turned to a ghost. A demon. A monster.

A man.

The bowl dropped from Evie's fingers. Dreams rotted to ashes. Shattering into pieces that sent Blue back to her room. Spreading chipped, painted flowers on ceramic across her feet.

"I'm sorry, Evie." The specter plucked a specific memory from the not-too-distant past. "I figured you'd heard me coming."

Fredrick Bowers. Standing at her kitchen opening as if he'd been here a hundred times. As if he haunted these walls. Wore a loose, long sleeved tee with some bar's logo and flannel bottoms. Looking at Evie's horrified expression with so much casual certainty.

As if he hadn't waited for this moment for weeks. As if he hadn't lingered three steps behind Evangeline Fenny this entire time.

Evie's fingers twitched to curl. Movement that shot signals up her

arms. To her spine. Toward her brain stem. Move. Scream. Run.

“I’ll warn you next time.” He cocked that darling grin that used to make her melt and bloom those bursting cartoon hearts.

Evie finally shuddered to breathe. Built a scream that perched up into her throat.

“Wouldn’t do that if I were you, Evie.” A chiding finger lifted.

The scream became a distant whimper from a little girl too afraid to beg this specific word growing up.

“Mama.”

She welled up. Shuddered and shook. Thought she might have a heart attack.

“Freddy! Oh, Evie. Oh, dear. I’m sorry, both of you. Time just kept moving.” Mona hurried between them. One hand on Fredrick’s chest. She donned an old silk robe with huge sleeves like a kimono. Red with cherry blossom trees swaying. “This is not how I wanted the introduction to go.”

Evie’s eyes drew to Mona’s dainty hand on Fredrick’s heart. Her smile. That specific love struck smile she used to reserve only for Jack Fenny. She gave Fredrick’s tee this playful tug to straighten it. Evie stood there in the frumpy sweatshirt dress she’d worn to bed with red heart-shaped sunglasses all over it.

Fredrick hadn’t taken his blazing eyes from Evie the second he saw her again.

“Evie. Oh, honey, I’m sorry about this. Ah... This is my boyfriend. I know you’ve met.” Mona fanned herself and peered down. “Evie, the floor!” She bent over to sweep pieces into a pile. Fredrick stared at Evie as he grasped a loose rag to drop it for Mona to gather the shards.

“It might seem strange, Evangeline. I know I was your teacher briefly-”

“Year and a half almost.” Evie cut without a tone in her voice.

“-I ran into Ramona in the city. Some things are always up to fate, I suppose.” He had shrugged.

Fate. Evie wanted to scream. Wanted to pound. Wanted to dig ceramic shards out of the trash and spit blood at him.

“You’re dating my mother.” She said. Calm and even. No acceptance.

“I had hoped for you two to meet over a nice dinner,” Mona lamented, “we’ve been going out since March. Over a month in. I didn’t want it to be so strange for you, darling.” She came to touch Evie’s face smelling of her pretty lotions and oils. Not seeing her daughter’s expression shattering.

“I’m not her teacher, Mona dear,” Fredrick reminded them, “not anymore.”

“Tonight, I’ll make a nice dinner and we can do this properly, Evie. Oh, rats. I’m late. I’m so late.” Mona fussed around and an arm caught her in in the doorway.

“I’ll drive you, love.” He kissed her mother on the mouth. Caught Evie’s eyes again. “I’ll be along in a moment, I just want to catch up with Evie a second.”

Check and mate.

Mona spirited herself away in a dream. Falling steadily into love and fire. Into rust and stardust. Evie knew the taste well. Knew the strength and fight it took to escape.

Music picked up as her mother primped to get ready for the salon. Fredrick pushed his hands into his pockets. Took one step. Evie went back until she hit the sink.

“You’re dating my mother.” She breathed out again.

“She’s a lovely woman. Talkative. Malleable. Looks more like you with brown hair. I’m glad she took my suggestion to dye it back.” He

noted kindly, still curling a grin. Disgusting. "I see what you mean. Still learning so much about my special girl. Oblivious Mona Fenny. She certainly means well, I guess that's still why you paid the price."

"Shut up." She welled.

"Yes, Evie, I remember every little thing you told me about you. About her. How you wept in my arms. How I made you feel so much better." He towered over her. Shadow pulling up toward Evie's eyes. "You not rushing to beg for her help tells me it's all true. Tells me that you understand how things are going to work from now on."

"From now on?"

"I enjoy her company. But, I came back for you, sweetness. I thought about it all. Long and hard." He reached up and Evie flinched back. Face contorting. "Look at me right now." A cold hand gripped her jaw, tilted her to look. Looking was hard. She saw herself in the black of his eyes. Terrified. "I don't want to hurt you, Evie. You're so special to me."

"I'll tell her."

"I *especially* don't want to hurt your sweet mother either. You said some harsh things. But, really, she isn't that bad. It would pain me to have to hurt her because of you." He clipped. Evie snapped off. He had her. "You're going to be a good daughter and do as you're told from now on. You're going to do as I say too. I think that goes without saying. Your mother doesn't deserve the pain you might put her through. We both know that."

Fredrick truly looked like he might kill her. And her mother. Frankly, Mona realizing the truth of it seemed just as bad. She'd scorn her daughter. Hate her. Feel true disgust.

She'd just die.

"Did you sleep with her?" Evie let one tear roll so he caught it. Sighed as if it were a chore.

"I had to, to keep up the charade. To find you again. Don't read too much into it. I did it for us."

Evie choked on that. Turned to puke into the sink. Fredrick reached over to run it. Rubbing her back as Mona's peppy Dolly music kept the sounds hushed.

"What are you going to do?"

"Whatever I want now, love. I always knew what was best for you. Maybe I'll whisk you away. Maybe I'll romance sweet Mona and propose. Be everything you need. We'll be better than *Lolita*. We'll be happy." He cupped Evie's jaw in one hand, felt her shaking as she tried not to throw up more bile. "And you're not going to interfere with what's best. You or that boy you're fooling around with. Make your little friends understand that." He kissed her head, inhaled into her curls with a contained sound in his throat.

Hands cupped her cheeks. Threatening to squeeze.

"Now, give me a smile. You look so much prettier when you smile at me, Evie."

Evie wiped her quivering lips. Spread them over teeth. Sharp canines on display.

"I always knew you were one of those girls. You're almost perfect. With the right hand, you'll get there." Fredrick patted her head and turned without ceremony. "Look nice at dinner. It'll make your mother happy. We both like seeing her happy, don't we?"

A door shut and Evie collapsed to the floor. Fingers crawling out desperately to hold something. Anything. They danced upon a piece Mona had missed shaped like a little triangle. Evie scratched it down her esophagus, tried not to scream like that would stop it. She scrambled to her bedroom and dressed. Locking Blue in because she didn't trust Fredrick with her kitten either.

Mona could be heard singing in her room. Pampering herself. Falling deeper. Evie climbed out the window and hit the grass below. Still wet with dew. Lungs tried to breathe and failed. She got to her feet and stumbled down the small hill around back.

"Evie!" A call didn't make her turn because it sounded too good.

Billy, in a torn muscle tank and tight workout shorts. Stuffing a trash bag into the garbage with a cigarette and annoyed squint. "Hey, Evie."

She kept walking down the back road. Half manic. Eyes wide, wet saucers.

Billy made this whistling sound trying to get her attention before he dropped his cigarette and picked up a pace to follow her. Evie heard him. Made a dash to run. Sticks broke under her tennis shoes. Into the forest as deep as she could get.

"Hey, Evie!" Billy puffed up to sprint. "We both know I can catch you even with my smoker lungs!"

Evie flailed and flew forward, almost impressing Billy behind her as he jumped over stumps and fallen branches. They went deeper into the woods. Evie sprinting harder like a gazelle. Faster. Further.

"Evie! Damn it!" He sounded upset now, grunting to keep up. Something caught her ankle violently before she was flung down a hill into the wet squelch of a tiny, muddy pond. Clothing ruined, Evie pressed her face under the water and scrambled into it's depths.

Submerged totally with bubbles pulling muted screams to the surface.

She howled there. Everything from her fingers to her spine contorting.

Evie wailed with no breath left until she began to choke. Hair all directions. Fierce little siren sinking into the blue. Hoping to be taken away. She wondered if Hamlet's Ophelia died peacefully or if she screamed to the very end. Probably the latter, she was owed that much.

Until Billy yanked her torso out to stop her from drowning. Dragged her back to the dirt and grass.

"Hey, hey!" He tried to pin her arms as she bucked and fought him. Sputtering while fingers combed her curls back. Evie pushed her face into Billy's chest and wailed again. Fingernails about cut into the skin

of his back as she grabbed for him to hold tight. "Evie, shit. Evie! Stop! What happened?"

"He's screwing my mother." She'd muffled into his ruined shirt.

"What?"

"Fredrick Bowers is having sex with my mother!" She shot up with eyes in a helpless fury. "He did it to get back at me. He's...He's dating her. He used everything I said and he stalked her and he brought her into this shit and he's been seeing her this entire time!" Evie cursed him. Felt that same stab in her stomach again. She beat at the ground and made a cry that sent birds flapping away.

Billy had this open mouth look of horror that scrunched with some rage.

"C'mon."

"No! No!" Evie planted herself on him there. "We can't do anything. He knew this was the only way back and I can't do anything."

"I said that I'd stop him, I will!"

"He screwed me and he's screwing my mother, do you realize-?"

"Yes, and I'm stopping it!" Billy tried again to get up but Evie dove on him. Arms winding desperately. Muddy water dripping.

"It'll kill her either way! Fredrick's hands or the truth, I can't!" Evie cried again. Billy went still. "He knew. I can't do anything, don't you realize that? He threatened her, Billy."

"Evie." Billy plucked her face up, wiping mud from her cheek. "You can't go into that house if he's in there."

"He has my mom." She welled. "I have to play this stupid game. I have to. I can't... She can't know anything. I'll go back. I'll make nice. I'll be so good. I'll keep making nice, high school is ending. I can run after."

“You think he’s not planning some grand escape with you?”

“I’ll leave right after graduation.”

“He’ll chase you.”

“And that’ll get him away from my mother. I don’t know what else I can do here. You think the police will help? You think my mother will? You didn’t see Fredrick’s eyes, something’s changed. My mother’s falling in love with him, I can’t stop it.”

Billy hardened at her there. Got angry so she didn’t see that he felt helpless.

“Here’s what we’re going to do.”

“We? You can’t beat him up again, Billy. That won’t work.”

“I’ll play with you.” He insisted instead. “We’re gonna go back and get cleaned up. We’re going to tell our parents that we’re dating. I’m sticking by you. We’ll shove it in Bowers’ dirty face. If we can’t move, neither can he.”

“Your dad.”

“Don’t care about him.” Billy paused and Evie pushed up. “Frankly, he might like it.”

“We’re having dinner tonight. A formal intro to their...relationship.” Evie touched her head. “My mother can’t know anything. Nothing about Fredrick and I. It’ll break her.”

You saved my life, Evie. Mona said it over and over again until Evie was twisted to pieces.

“I have to save her.” The words crushed in her throat. Choked her.

“I’m not letting you sit alone with him. That’s not happening.”

“I can handle, Fredrick. He wants his little Lolita child bride. Fine. I’ll be a horrible child for him.” She sneered, fists clenching on her wet knees. “This is my fault. I fell for him in the first place. I did this.

I've been such a dirty girl, Billy."

"You think you didn't have a target on your back the moment he saw you in school?" Billy's chest fell. "That wasn't your fault and neither is this. He's a piece of shit. A leech. You're not dirty, Evie, you're just hurt and trying to grow up."

"I still fell for him." She uttered pitifully, head shaking. "I can't bring you into this, too."

"Already into it." Billy's shoulder's fell before he took Evie's face and kissed her cold forehead. "Not leaving. It's me and you. It's us. Right?"

She sniffled at him, nodding with the shivers in full bloom.

"I'm gonna keep you safe. Away from him. Start sneaking you into my window. Okay?" Billy pressed his lips. "C'mon, get up. We'll clean at your place if they're gone.

"He painted it red." Evie blinked several times.

"What?" Billy was heaving her to her feet, pulled in close to his frame.

"His car."

** **

It was carefully planned. Right down to the outfit. Evie wore a yellow-orange sunset printed tee because Fredrick once said the colors weren't becoming on her. She tucked it into some fitted jeans. He didn't like her to wear jeans. Didn't like how they hugged her tummy and how she looked less lady-like. Whatever that meant.

Billy's ring hung in the open.

Three knocks.

She was surprised when Neil answered. A smile crossed. Painted a firetruck red.

“Good evening, Mr. Hargrove.” Evie batted her lashes, hands clasping for a cute shrug. Something particularly obscene and signature in only the way Evangeline navigated the world. “Is Billy here?”

“Uh, he is.” Neil called out for his son. “Has he done something or do you two have a school obligation?”

“Oh, he’s my dinner guest.” Evie chirped. Neil’s eyes narrowed on her, mustache twitching. “I wanted to fetch him, you know he likes to take his time getting ready at that mirror. Boys.” She giggled and Neil twitched this almost bemused look.

“Hey.” Billy stepped beyond Neil. Ignoring him. Lips pecked Evie’s blushed cheek. “Not late.”

“Not this time.” She quipped, one palm flat on his chest to giggle as if Neil wasn’t there.

“Dad,” he began, “you know, Evangeline Fenny, our neighbor. We’re dating.” Tone sounded like he was ordering breakfast. “She’s also my prom date in May. I need a tux and corset.”

“Corsage, silly.” Evie preened in her deepest daydream of dreams. “I’m not picky about flowers. Boys usually get white, cause it’ll go with everything.”

Neil’s brows were already up his head. Evie reached for Billy’s hand.

“Oh?” He managed there. “Evangeline?”

“It’s new, sir, for both of us.” She explained carefully. “We wanted our parents to know first of course.”

Neil stood there dumb as if nothing in life could have prepared him for this exact moment. His wily alley cat of a son dating. Committing. Talking prom and flowers. Smiling like that. Like the sun had come out.

“We’re having dinner at my house to tell my mother. I hope that’s okay?” Evie had further gushed. Neil blinked a couple times,

plastered a half smile.

“Well, you’ll have to spend tomorrow night at our house. Tell us all about...this thing.” Neil gestured aimless at them. Billy gave Evie’s hand a squeeze, tugged.

“Yes, sir.” Billy cocked his head. “Evie.”

“Bye, Mr. Hargrove. Great tie.” She waved as they went down the steps, hurrying off together. Evie pushed in close to Billy. “Fredrick will be here any minute.” As if on cue, the red Plymouth was charging forth to park. Fredrick pushed out and met Billy’s eyes. A bouquet of red poppies bundled under one arm.

“Freddy!” Mona bounced, already clicking excitedly to kiss him. Arms tossed to bring him in close. Evie felt her skin crawling. Billy squeezed her hand again. “Oh? Billy. What are you-?”

“I invited him to dinner.” Evie sprang forward. “I figured if you wanted to give me an intro to...yeah. I can also tell you my good news. Billy and I are dating.”

“Ooh! By Laveau herself, thank you. Finally!” Mona rushed to them. “That’s so lovely. You know, I always had a feeling about this. A good one. Billy, come on, come inside. We have plenty of food.”

Mona stole Billy away and left Evie to face Fredrick coming toward her.

“I brought flowers.”

Evie snatched them. Tossed them in the trash.

“Evie!” Mona had turned.

“They’ll hurt my cat.” She stared up at Fredrick. Grinned with force. “But, the thought matters.”

“You’re right. My mistake. Little thing can barely fend for itself.” He passed her. Evie chilled and followed, hurried to Billy’s side as he dragged to be near her. They went inside. Mona pulled Evie to help with dinner. Left the boys to set the table.

“Bobby, was it?” Fredrick turned his head, not caring that Billy was in his class.

“You know my name.” Billy narrowed. “And you know what I look like standing over you after you hurt my girl. Things are gonna move nice and easy around the Fennys. Got it?”

“Not attacking me? I’m shocked. Evie made some impression. Poor thing. She always worried too much.”

“I lost my mother, Fred, and Evie isn’t losing hers either way this spins.” Billy stood his ground there. “But, if you get near her, I’m promising two hits. I hit you, you hit the ground.”

“I’ve let the past go, I’m sure you can as well, son. It’s clear we both care about Evangeline.” Fredrick softened there. Billy turned razor sharp.

“Is it?” Blue eyes sparked. “Call me son again and I’ll rip your tongue out your throat.”

“Hey. It’s ready.” Evie came between them with a plate of rolls. “Blackened chicken. Dirty rice.”

The mission: ruin Fredrick’s evening with teenage mushy crap.

Billy and Evie sat too close. They kept touching. Arm. Shoulder. Knee. They fed each other bites. Things they both would have found annoying. They snickered and whispered like they were alone there. Shared savory kisses.

“Can you hand me another roll, Billy?” Evie cocked her head. “I’d like it if you buttered it for me. With honey this time, too.”

“My pleasure, Eves.” He caught Fredrick clearing his throat.

“So, you two. Cat’s out of the bag. I have to know what exactly happened.” Mona drank from her glass. “Freddy, you should have seen them snip and bicker before. Like two angry jungle cats.”

“We still do, mom, keeps things interesting.” Evie nibbled from the hot roll, not hungry.

“Bobby was quite the Don Juan around class. The girls fawned.”

“Billy.” Evie corrected first. Fredrick chuckled with a loose shrug.

“Eighteen and still wanting people to call you, Billy, William?” He continued. “One of those little boy habits. Endearing for sure.”

“Like the sweet way it sounds when Evie says it, Fredrick.” Billy winked, tugging a curl for good measure. “So, you two. If my dad dated my ex-teacher, I’d die. Small world though. Tell us the story.”

“Well, I was at this party at a bar and it’s so embarrassing, we bumped right into each other. Red wine everywhere.” Mona patted Bowers’ arm as he chewed.

“Never did get the stain out.” He peered at Evie who stared back. Colorless. “I said it was my fault and I owed her another stiff drink. All’s fair.”

“And we just got to talking. I didn’t even know he’d taught at Hawkins until our first date later.” Mona touched her lips. “Well, I knew it was kismet...after we spilled the wine, Freddy made a reference to Dolly’s song. ‘Coat of Many Colors.’ I about died with laughter. It was gift wrapped.”

“Wow, almost like he already knew that about you.” Evie side-eyed Fredrick there. “That’s so cute, mom, you call him Freddy. Totally adorable. Baby, maybe we should have nicknames?”

She knew Bowers loathed the nickname, he’d told her once.

Evie rubbed Billy's thigh again, watched him smile.

"You're just, My Angel, Eves. Flung out of space." Billy Hargrove. Stunning boy over the moon for her.

Coy, she bit her lip. Kept rubbing his legs until the denim heated. Billy's arm was loose around her chair, thumb drawing circles into cotton. She slowly went back to her plate and saw Fredrick's eyes blare. Two massive headlights intent on her.

“I only know Freddy as good old Mr. B. Always letting me borrow

his books.” Evie cut tiny bites without looking down. “Always taking an interest in his students. Always available after school.”

“You know, I often find they return that kindness right back to me.” Fredrick chimed in, wiping his lips on a napkin. “So rewarding.” There was a jolt when something squeaked under the table. Blue scrambled up Billy’s leg. “Oh, sorry, I must have stepped on its tail.” He said that in the same even voice.

“I’ll put her in my room.” Evie shot up to take the kitten. Locked her away safely. Her own heart was a hummingbird. Whirling around a cage. Aching for pins and gemstones and shattered chicken bones left over on their plates. Mute, she returned to take her seat.

Exhausted.

“Banana cream pie for dessert.” Mona popped up to get it. Not at all present.

“One of my favorites.” Evie rubbed Billy’s thigh again, they leaned in for a kiss. Tongues sweeping.

“Thought most sweets were, sure look like you got your fill.” Fredrick remarked crudely with Mona out of earshot. Evie leaned out to sit back, chest sinking. “Look a little plumper since I last saw you. Probably don’t fit all those little lace things I bought you.”

“Doesn’t matter as long as Billy can lift me. Same size. Plenty active. I skate fast and hit hard. And I look better out of them.” She placed both hands on the table. “And I prefer silks and satin to lace. You always forgot that.” Tension left the second Mona returned. All of them flashing kind smiles. “Mom, Billy and I wanted to make a late showing tonight. Can we have our pie later?”

“Well, I’ll never stand between young love.” Hands came up to usher them. Evie hurried up tugging Billy with her. Lips near his ear as they went to the hallway so she could pick a coat.

“Grab your keys, meet me at my window.” She pushed him to go off and went into her room. Only got two seconds to collapse before Billy was tapping the glass. Evie gathered what she needed and

opened it. Offering him a small cat crate.

“What are you doing?”

“He’s gonna hurt my kitten, she can’t live here anymore.” Evie stared at the floor. “Put her stuff in your car, we’ll take her somewhere else.”

“Evie.” Billy stopped her. She refused to meet his eyes. “You think he won’t hurt you the same?”

“Take her stuff. Please.”

Irritated, he took two trips. Gathered all Blue’s things as Evie fought tears and grabbed her coat.

“Bye, mom.” She whooshed by to go. Smacking the door to rush into Billy’s open arms waiting.

“Dry your eyes until we’re in the car.” He got the door for her and hurried around. Blue meowed and pawed to get to Evie through bars. Not understanding. “Where am I taking you?”

“Carol lives in a tiny apartment. Tommy probably can’t either, his mom’s allergic. Heather’s parents don’t allow pets.” She paused. “Steve’s parents don’t care what he does. They’re never home. Maybe the company will be good for him.”

“Christ.” Billy put the key in. Drove off with no music. No talking. They got to Loch Nora and pulled up to Steve’s place. “What if he says no?”

Evie didn’t answer and got out with Blue’s cage, pushing her finger in to let the kitten nuzzle her. Billy eyed then and knocked on the door. A beat before steps resonated and Steve was standing there in his pj pants with a fitted tee.

“Uh, hey...” One hand pushed those pretty brown locks back.

“Hey, can we come in?” Evie began. Dead. “Gonna tell you a secret.”

Steve swept his eyes between them. Wordlessly stood back to let the couple inside.

** ** *

"You're not going back into that house!" Steve's protest near echoed. The story brought him no ease. None at all. "Hargrove, back me up."

"Already tried that. It's about her mother." Billy continued, perched in a desk chair near the window as Evie and Steve shared seats on the bed.

"This guy is screwing with your life, Evie, he's dangerous. He's sick." Steve had this fierce look when her eyes lifted. "Are you listening to me?"

"I just need to know if you can take Blue in. She's sweet," brown eyes welled, "she won't be any trouble. Please. I figured she'd like it with you better."

Steve's shoulders fell before he wrapped Evie in a hug. Almost forgetting Billy's eyes there.

"I'll babysit her until you can take her back." He said before her arms lifted to squeeze him. "You can't go back to that house."

"She's gonna stay with me a few nights. Her doors got locks. I can stay with her. We'll tell the others and they'll help us." Billy paused. "I can sneak her into my room after my dad goes to bed. He's got rules."

"My parents don't give two shits about me, she can come here too." Steve had offered, sounding more wounded. "I'm helping. We should tell the others now."

"I will at school, but they can't... You can't interfere with this. You can't chase him off, he'll hurt my mom. I have to figure out a way around him. I have to wait this out. She's gonna find out. I can't..." Evie's leg bobbed. Blue roamed Steve's desk across from them, smelling every inch of his belongings.

“You’re gonna *wait* him out?” Steve looked to Billy helplessly.

“I don’t have much of a choice here, Steve.”

“We can go to Hopper.” He stood but she snatched him back down.

“No cops!” Evie surged, all spite. “My mother will... Steve, you think anyone will really believe me? A fat girl with starry eyes and teenage fantasies. Just look at me! No one, but us.”

Steve searched her, head shaking before he rubbed at his neck.

“Fine, but do me a solid and sleep here tonight. Both of you, I don’t care. My parents have been gone pretty much all month and they keep extending the trip. I can’t...I...” Steve cut himself off and welled. Something he buried deep cracked to the surface. “You know, Barbara Holland was at my house the night she disappeared? Alone, outside. Right out that window. I didn’t check on her. See her walking to her death.”

“Steve.” Evie touched his leg and Billy’s eyes dropped there. “That wasn’t your fault. What happened to Barbara was an accident.”

“Yeah, well I was too busy being selfish to help it. I wanted her to leave so Nance and I could sleep together.” He crossed his arms. “Not watching another friend walk into danger at night. Don’t care if you guys wanna screw in my bed. Just stay here tonight... Might help the runt transition.”

Steve pointed to Blue pawing at his coat sleeve. Evie cracked a genuine smile.

“I’ll call my mom and tell her not to wait up for me.”

** ** *

Steve showed them to a guest room with a huge bed at the center. Neither seemed daunted when Evie half undressed facing away from them. She seemed to not be all there either way.

“The bed’s not pressed to a wall.” She said, standing in her underwear and shirt. Arms tight around herself with shuffling bare

feet

“Rich people decorate weird, I know.” Steve shrugged, dropping extra blankets at the foot of the bed. “You should just try to get some sleep. As many hours as you can.”

Billy ushered Evie by the wrist into the middle of the bed.

“Can you both stay around,” she curled up, “maybe until I fall asleep?”

“Both?” Steve gave Billy this wary glance until he sighed and cocked his head. Jeans were tossed next to Evie’s pants before Billy tucked in behind her. Carefully, she patted the bed until Steve sat down atop the covers.

“Can you maybe lay down? I just...I usually tuck into the wall with my pillows. Compacted.”

“Not gonna smack you.” Billy mumbled behind her, head lifting to watch Steve recline. Fully clothed. Still atop the covers.

“Better?” He side-eyed Evie and saw her curls bob. Blue curled up on Billy’s jeans to knead at them. Purring. Steve reached to shut the lamp out and gave this shaky breath.

“Not gonna bone next to you.” Billy broke the weird silence, arm shifted over Evie’s side so she could tuck back into him.

“That’s a relief. I just don’t feel like doing laundry.” Steve lowered his voice and shifted awkwardly on his side. Caught Evie’s eyes peeking up as she pulled the covers to her nose.

“You’re not comfortable.” Evie muttered there.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re planking in jeans next to me. It’s cold.”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable and I don’t want the pack of meat behind you to put me in the hospital again.” Steve curled one arm under his head. Evie felt the words twang bitterly and felt Billy

inhale sharper behind her.

“That was fucked up.” He said, moving to lie on his back. “Would you believe it...if I said that it had not much to do with you?”

“Yeah, actually. I would.” Steve pressed his lips. “You came to school the week after...looking almost as bad. Guessing that wasn’t Max. Sometimes, you need a bad fight. Keep you out of a worse one. I figured the worse one still found you.”

“It did.” Billy licked his lips. “Fucking punchline.”

“Literally.” Steve twitched a smile and Billy actually chuckled. They both did softly when Evie nestled between them. Safe. Billy shifted back into her, got his arm pulled over her stomach so she could hold onto him.

“Do you guys ever feel this...pit inside you? Not hard like a cherry or peach pit. Just this strange nothing you can’t fill no matter what you...?” Evie trailed off. “You sink and spiral and you just wanna feel real again. Wanna feel in control of something. You don’t want to fill it with real food or anything like that. But, you know it’s there and it’s starving. And you’re starving too.”

“Usually try beer or whiskey.” Came Billy’s reply. She shrank a little. Not joking. Billy picked that up quick. “You mean like something is missing?”

“How do I know it was even there to begin with?”

“Evie,” Steve began, “this thing with Bowers-”

“It’s not just him. It’s everything. Don’t you feel it even when you’re happy? Like really happy?” Evie exhaled. “It’s like a big tear that just unravels to get bigger and you’d do anything to fill it so...I don’t know what I’m saying. It’s not happy or sad. It’s nothing. It’s not me and it’s not the me I pretend to be for my mother. It’s something in between. It’s a big, wide nothing.”

Maybe she wasn’t grateful. Mona has insinuated that on occasion before.

Billy went quiet trying to read her.

"It's just...everything is so much. Even happiness. I don't know how to handle it all. Sometimes, I don't know what I'm allowed to feel and what I'm supposed to do with it. Everything." She curled into the pillows and felt lips touch her temple. Brown eyes fluttered to see Steve pulling out.

"You feel any damn thing you want. Maybe you need to let other people help you carry it," he offered, shifting down at Billy's head perking to eye him like a tense jungle cat, "you know, when it's too much?"

"Y-Yeah." Evie swallowed. "That's the problem. Letting go."

"What do you want right now?" Steve continued harder. "Just...right this second, Evie, what do you want?"

"I want my mom and dad." She rasped without missing a beat. "I wish they weren't so fucked up. *They hurt me*. They put it there, the big pit. They both put their sickness inside me and then the blame, too. The *nothing*..."

Evie shattered. Became fully immersed. Fully aware. Yanked from her daydreams. She tried to articulate the hopes and needs that sunk to hide under her skin. Hands pushed to cover the crumbling expression before she was sobbing. Drowning like Ophelia bobbing in an endless sea. Kissed by wind and flower petals. Beautiful and romanticized only in death.

No justice in that.

"Hey, hey, Evie." Billy pushed up to hush her. One broad palm on her arm. He darted to accuse Steve and let the tension drop off his back. Shoulders sagged. "Get under the covers, Harrington. Help me calm her down."

Steve blinked at him, waited for it to be a test.

Evie wasn't letting the burden go so Billy seized to help himself and extended the olive branch to someone else she clearly trusted. Someone who brought comfort even when he, himself, was being a

dick. Steve's jeans hit the floor before he shimmied in next to Evie, pulling her close so Billy could close in behind her.

Compacted between two warm bodies, she stiffened at the proximity. Sniffing followed. Billy kissing her hair and tracing lines until Steve brought her to burrow into his chest. Neither boy picked a fight to bicker with the other. Evie's whimpering tapered off until exhaustion took her away. Maybe by force but she was sleeping deeply moments later.

Billy and Steve sandwiched her in under the covers. Shooting each other idle looks in the dark.

"You ever have a thing for Evie?" Billy asked it blunt and without threat.

"Dunno. Feels all jumbled since Nancy." Steve might have blushed. "I mean, I like her and all. She and Heather brought me out of my stupid funk. Heath tried many times to set us up, but I chickened out each time."

"Hm."

"I mean, she obviously liked you even if you were an asshole." Steve paused. "Are. Are an asshole."

Billy cracked this almost smile.

"And you're a gentleman, huh?"

"No, I'm just too damn nice these days. Did and said some fucked up things. You might have liked me if you showed up one year earlier." Steve deflated some, freezing as Evie's nose nuzzled into his tee. "I like Evie. I like hanging out with her. Just not ready to put my heart on the line."

"Wheeler mangled it pretty bad?"

"No, I did that." Steve blinked, head shaking.

"You are too nice." Billy decided without any real judgement. "Evie would have said yes."

"I know. And she would have been too nice to break things off and I would have had to nudge her toward you inevitably. Shove pride aside to be a big person."

"Breaking your heart for others isn't love." Billy had uttered after a beat. Steve snapped to see him again. Double-taking as if that really hadn't come out of his mouth.

"No." Steve agreed. "Not the worst thing in the world though. Seeing someone else happy."

"Yeah. Well, Evie's not happy. She's in pain." Billy blinked. Both of them shared a look and veered away. "We're just waiting it out with her."

"There's gotta be something." Steve's helpless tone had Billy tensing.

"We get her out of the house anytime we can. I don't care if she's with you alone, my house is complicated too. Dad likes to play with locks on my door and window. Likes to play with belts and beer bottles, too." It was clear what Billy was asking.

"I'll be there if she needs me." Came the even reply. More assured. Evie made a little sound and shifted over to face Billy. Seeking his scent and fire out. A gentle palm cupped the back of her head. He missed Steve twitching a smile.

"Doesn't feel real. Even after sitting at that table. Bowers is some kind of crazy."

"Jesus, her mother, too."

"If she paid attention to Evie from the start, none of this would have happened." Billy was particularly prickly about that. Steve opened and closed his mouth, unsure if he wanted to agree or be empathetic. "It happened. Doesn't matter now, it already happened."

"We'll tell the others at school. Or Evie will." Steve tried to sound certain. "We'll just be there for her. It's all we can do."

Billy stared at the ceiling. Frowned deeper.

“That’s why I’m worried.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yikes. Sorry all to crash the party like this. Messy situation on the rise. The next few chapters are on the downer side but have hope for our lovers and co!!

Please chat with me below if you have time, I'd love to talk about the twist and this chapter or anything!!!
xoxo

My writing blog is Alias-B.tumblr.com

23. Cough Syrup

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone! I'm back and doing well. Lots of writing this past week!! I've left tumblr for my safety and mental health and will no longer be active there for a long or little while. But it's been a really great and productive week with no distractions. :))) Thank you to my friends who supported me, I hope we speak soon and I'm always around to talk.

With Fredrick's return we have some heavier chapters coming along with some mental chess between him and Evie. Lots of overlapping domestic story lines between her and Billy. A threat from the past further complicates things as the teens try to look out for each other. Thanks for tuning in and please share thoughts with me after! TW: Fredrick's manipulation and harassment. Misogyny. Abuse. Mention of assault.

Evie couldn't meet their eyes. Didn't touch her lunch.

"We could take a bat to him and his shitty car." Tommy chimed in. Helpful. Trying to be because no one else spoke. Carol stared, unusually silent.

"That...That's unreal." Heather rubbed her head. Evie clenched her fists under the table, seated between Steve and Billy. "It's heavy. It's not...he's not..."

"He is. They are. My mother's head over heels for him." Evie winced. Not crying. Blank. "I'm just telling you guys the situation."

"We'll help you, you can stay with any of us." Heather reached across the table and recoiled. "There's gotta be...something."

"Something's off about him now. Like he's ticking." Evie frowned, fingers knitting together out of nerves. "I can handle Fredrick. I have

to.”

“You don’t have to do shit.” Carol sparked. “You’re just gonna...what? Play. No. That’s not fair. It’s not.” She swept up from the table, sniffing to march off. Tommy opened his mouth, head shaking as the rest of them looked on in question.

“I got this. Her mom and stepdad are, uh...not gonna be back for awhile.”

“No, I got it.” Evie was already standing. “Don’t interfere with Fredrick. Not too much.” She hurried after Carol and followed her to the bathrooms. “Hey. Hey, Carol.”

“It’s not fair.” She turned aside, arms crossing with a ruffle of orange hair.

“Few things are in high school,” Evie decided, coming to her carefully. “It’s going to be okay.”

“You’re such a liar, Fen.” Red locks flicked again so she could display her watery eyes. Mascara not running because she’d done the smart thing and invested in waterproof. “I played this game too, you know.”

“I know.” Evie peered at her face in the mirror. No colors to be found. “My mom gave him a key. Can you believe that shit?”

“Yeah, I can. Does it open the lock to your room?”

“Just the front door, garage, and attic.” Evie took a cool paper towel to her face and cleaned it.

“Start hiding snacks and water in your room. Have a bag packed with things you need.” Carol turned Evie around and opened a little makeup bag she carried on her wrist. “Keep your bike in an accessible spot since you don’t have a car.”

Carol nonchalantly began to apply shadow to Evie’s eyes as she spoke. Casual. Haunted. But, her hands didn’t shake once.

“Tommy’s gotta collection of pocket knives, he’ll give you one.”

“A knife?”

“Yeah, just nice to carry one or keep nearby. He can show you how to work and hold it.” Carol switched to liner as Evie tried to be still. A hum followed. “You can’t mope around the house when you’re home either. You have to actually act normal. Do your hair and makeup routine every morning. Don’t wear your hair up though, it’s easier to pull. No pony tails. No braids. Keep running shoes around.”

“Care...” Evie tapered off. Let Carol paint her lips a cherry red gloss.

“Wear tight jeans. With belts.” Carol ignored her to continue, eyes on her lips. “Always look put together and pristine because Mona will notice if you’re not. Make it harder for him to put his hands on you to mess you up. It’s armor. Avoid dangly earrings. I know you’ll have trouble with that one. Also easy to pull. And I know spring and summer are coming but...keep long sleeves and turtlenecks around. Just in case.”

Carol was the only friend preparing Evie for the absolute worst.

“Wear tampons on your period if you get any spotting and play the talk up even if you don’t as if it’s going for a longer cycle...if you need to, it grosses them out. Wear lipstick that smears and always have perfume on. Shit will stick to that fucker.” A thumb ran under Evie’s mouth. Carol tilted her chin for mascara. “Grow your nails just enough for scratching but not so much that they’ll snap back. Hurts like hell.”

“Only if you keep doing them, I’m spoiled.”

“I’ll charge you something eventually.” Carol winked, applying the fluffiest light coat of peach pink blush. “If he comes at you, make him god damn fight for it. You can bite him, but you hold on until something comes loose. The more he hits you, the harder your jaw will lock down. Make it count.”

“Okay.”

“No drinking around him. Keep pills around for headaches. If...If

he... Try to get yourself aroused so it hurts less. I know how this sounds. It's fucked up what I'm saying, but if it happens...I don't want it to happen, but if it does..."

Evie stopped Carol by cupping her face, finally locking their eyes together. Arms shifted to pulled her in, tight around Carol's shoulders. She tensed and melted down in one second.

"I love you, too." Evie said and Carol hitched this whimper, tossing her arms around Evie's waist. Let Evie cup the back of her head, too. This girl she'd grown to care about.

They faced the mirror to double check any imperfections. When all of them were concealed enough, Carol left her gloss tube in Evie's palm and went out first. No more tears to follow.

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Evie clutched Billy's hand the ride home. Neither remarking that his knuckles were white. Max swept her eyes between them.

"Evie, you okay?"

"Fine." Evie's head still shook. "My mom's just dating some guy and it's all....serious. I guess I'm in a strange headspace about it."

"Cause you miss your dad?"

"Something like that." Evie swallowed, eyes ahead. She pecked Billy's mouth upon parking, thumb swiping her gloss away before his tongue flicked to wet his mouth.

"Is that his car?" Max pressed her face near the glass to see the shiny red. Fredrick Bowers perched against the side looking at his watch. Perfect hair and sideburns. Casual 70s way of dress. Too cool. "Have I seen him before?"

"He worked at Hawkins High." Billy chimed in upon seeing Evie flush. "Transferred out, or something."

"Oh..." Max's head tilted in thought. She didn't say anything else as Evie pushed out. Fredrick twitched this smile that got wider.

“Evie. You go get ready for dinner at my place. Susan said seven.” Billy got in front of her, arm lifting to point at the house.

“Mona wanted to do her hair. At the salon. Mother-daughter thing. I offered to drive her.” Fredrick crossed to them. “Won't be long.”

“Max, go in the house.” Billy sharply turned to her. She stared beyond him at Fredrick Bowers. Didn't say what she was thinking and swerved to go off. Something in his eyes was all too familiar to Mad Max. “I'll drive her to Mona's.”

“Evie. You decide. You mother thought it could be good for us to catch up. Bond. She told me all about her worries, you know. You never got along with any other man she brought home. Really sounded so wounded about it. Said if you don't take to me, she doesn't know what she'll do. But, the last thing I want,” he touched his chest, “is tension between my girls.”

“She's not your girl.” Billy rapped at him. Evie touched his arm and came between them.

“I'll drive with you.” She twitched away as Billy tried to grasp at her shoulder.

“I'll have her back to you in one piece. Brand new and shiny.” Fredrick grinned that time at Billy's hard eyes. Easy triumph.

“Evie.” He tried not to beg it. Watching her walk willingly into the belly of the beast without him.

“I'll see you for dinner, Billy.” She didn't look at him. Got into the car with her backpack in her lap as some guard. Billy dug his fingernails into his palms watching them go. A hard kick sent the trashcan over into the street.

“You don't have late classes?” Evie made herself tiny so Fredrick played some music. Stevie Nicks. Songs Evie loved.

“I actually still work for Hawkins, dear.”

“What?”

"I took the rest of the semester off for, uh, personal reasons. Your mother thinks my father passed away and I'm settling his affairs in the next town over. You'd like the new place. It has a huge backyard and a skylight in the bedroom." Fredrick drove smoothly. Not like Billy at all. "For you, dear. You always wanted one, didn't you? Loved to look at the moon after making love."

Evie's face snapped to stare outside. Wild in fury.

"So, you're--"

"Free as the day is long. Your mother works so many hours. I'm surprised she doesn't keep you closer to help her. I sense there's already tension in the Fenny house. More than you let on before, dear." Fredrick touched her knee and Evie's leg jumped aside. He recoiled, sighing. "Such a child. You have to forgive me at some point."

"No, I don't." She faced him. "You hit me. You choked me. You beat me. Sometimes you hurt me during sex and you didn't stop."

"I understand what you might think of me, Evie." Fredrick sighed. Somber. "I'm new at this too. Loving someone this hard. It's the effect *you* have. It's all love, I promise."

"You can't blame me." Evie snipped at him.

"Did you ask me to stop when we made love?"

"I--"

"But, did you ask?" He peered at her in the light. Evie went silent. "I'm not a mind reader, Evangeline. And that night, I was too afraid to lose you. I'm never going to love anyone as much as I love you. Ever. It's too powerful. Men lose control, we can't help it."

He welled for good measure. Met her eyes.

"No one will love you as hard as I do. No one will understand what we have. Giving you up, it's out of the question. I won't do it again, I promise. Maybe you should think about the signals you put out." He turned quickly behind the salon and parked. Evie reached for the

door in a hurry before the lock came down.

“You’re screwing my fucking mother.” Evie leaned in to hiss that. A hand shot out for a thick rope of curls.

“I’m being patient because you’re too young to understand this.” Fredrick got closer, something fruity like citrus on his breath.

“If you smear my make-up, she’ll know.” Evie grunted, eyes squeezing because tears pricked at him twisting her hair. Fredrick puffed at that. Loosened his grip.

“Can’t even pretend to give a shit about me, can you, Evie? Fucking heartless.” He pushed her away so Evie scrambled back into the locked door, untangling from her seat belt. “You’re a heartless, little girl. I’ll bring you back. The Evie I knew. Who used to hang onto my every word and laugh and hold me. You’ll fall into my arms again. Pretty girls like you always need a strong pair of arms.”

“I was stupid.” Evie choked out. She could hold herself just fine.

“What’s stupid is you trying to run from us. I’m not your father. You’re just projecting all that hurt onto me. You don’t even give two shits about how that makes me feel. Like I’m trash. After everything!” Fredrick slapped the passenger mirror down. “Fix yourself.”

Evie had winced harshly, eyes shutting before the locks came up and he got out of the car.

Breathe. Trembling, she checked her makeup over and got out. Eyes lingered on Fredrick there before she turned in a shuffle to go toward the back door.

“You’re so beautiful, Evie, just like your mother.” He shared sweeter, waiting until she turned. “Your mother won’t be pretty though, if you keep up this silly game with me.”

“You can’t. This isn’t a game, it’s my life! I just want it back.” Evie crossed back in a hurry. The car separating them until Fredrick shifted around it. “You can’t hurt her.”

“It’s like you don’t give a shit about her either. About anyone. You

used to care about other people.”

“I care!” Evie caught herself, chilling to level out so she didn’t sob.

“My wife was heartless too in the end. Packing her fucking bags. Throwing her little jewelry box at my head.”

“Maybe she found you plowing another kid.”

Fredrick’s hand came up and Evie cringed, waiting for a slap before a palm came to her shoulder. Squeezing.

“She didn’t understand love or family or the vows we made. I told myself I’d never be with someone so unfeeling again and I found you. Trotting to my desk with those big eyes. Opening your heart and soul for me to splash around in. I saw you, Evie. I saw something in you I never saw in my wife. I never saw it in anyone and you might think you can lock me out, but that’s not happening. I’m not like your dad. I know I hurt you, I made a mistake. It was one fucking mistake.”

“Spilling coffee on someone is a mistake. Showing up late is a mistake. You fucked your underage student and then you beat the shit out of her.” Evie’s arms came up to elbow at his chest when he reeled her closer.

“You won’t fool me with your coldness. Your daddy walked out because he never loved you, sweetness. I promise you, I won’t let you feel that ever again.” He promised. “I won’t let you drown. Just feel me.”

Fredrick hugged her. Pretending she wasn’t squirming away. Patting her little head and stroking fingers down her back. Arms like hot irons forcing her into his chest.

“You don’t have to project that pain onto me, Evie. We’re just having a tiff. We’ll get through it together.” He squeezed her in tighter. Evie thought her spine would snap. “Just let it all go like a good girl. You’re safe. Don’t you feel safe here in my arms?”

Lips touched her head. He pressed her into the car, rubbing against her.

She wanted to scream and didn't.

"This isn't about my dad." She managed, fists clenched to her chest. Fredrick held her closer. Eyes darting down the alleyway.

"Everything is about your dad, we both know that. You look for him everywhere in everyone. He's the damn boogeyman. You think the world's gonna reject you like he did. Don't you, Evie?" Fredrick kissed her head. "But, you don't have to see him in me. I saved you. That's what you used to say. Remember?"

Evie was clinging to him. Out of desperation. Out of fear. Out of that need her father pooled inside her heart.

Flash.

She reeled away. Looked up and saw the stairs pulled down leading to their attic. A never-ending shadow curling out to greet her. She pondered again where her stuffed bear had gone. Chills slunk down the steps before...

"Evie." Fredrick had her shoulders. Shaking her back to life. Brown eyes fluttered to look up at him. "There you are. All better. We'll keep working at this until you're perfect."

She didn't reply, lip wobbling.

"Go on inside. She's waiting for you. Mona was too excited, she told me you don't often let her touch your hair these days. You have a cold nature, Evie, I'll help you escape it again. Even if it kills me. Or the both of us."

Numb, Evie blinked again at him. Felt something shatter before she was turning to go inside.

"I'll meet you back out here." He'd continued. "Let mother and daughter bond a bit. Feels so needed."

The door shut and Evie stumbled into a station that had been hauled to the back cause the mirror had broken from it. Random salon items and trash littered the dusty top. Evie felt around with desperate fingers. Pulled a battery from some electric trimmers to see

a gleam in dim light.

She wondered how it would light up her tongue. If it would peel apart inside her. Acid burning from the inside out. Cleansing her cold nature away. Lips parting, Evie brought it up and skidded to drop it when the door opened.

“Evie! Finally, I got my chair open for you, darling.” Mona’s usual pep glittered. She set a broom aside and gestured. Not seeing the battery roll by her feet.

Evie came to her like a skittish animal. Floated to sit in a chair as her mother hummed a tune and danced around her. Draping her favorite apron around her neck.

“Are you listening?” Mona tugged curls and tenderness exploded in Evie’s scalp.

“What?” She breathed out, silent. The salon’s bright lights washed colors together. She looked around at her plants. Perfectly happy and green. Not missing her.

“I said, we were due for a little hair bonding. Make your curls nice and shiny for dinner tonight. I know you’re finicky about them.”

Evie let her mother brush out her curls. Wanted to sob. The sweetness of it thickened her blood. Caused her heart to sputter desperately.

“Really, Evie, I know it’s been strange without...” She cleared her throat. “I’ve had my dates of course, but I’m sure this is mighty strange for you as well. Having a strong man around the house.”

Mona wanted Evie’s blessing.

Fingernails dug into the arm rest.

Evie saw herself under Fredrick. His hand around her throat. Clocks spun and tumbled. She blinked and instead spied her mother in a bed. Panting and whimpering in pain. Barely able to breathe. Steel vice hands holding her down to ignore it. Blood pooling over the silky sheets looking like candied syrup. Spilling hot over the edges.

Save her.

Save her.

Save her.

Flash.

Evie felt a hand on her back, guiding her to climb the attic steps.

“Mouse, I have a surprise for you up here...”

“Evie!” Mona waved the brush in her face. Heartstrings snapped. Evie jerked up. Everything tilted to focus. “Oh, sweetheart, I know exactly how you must be feeling.”

“You...” Evie mashed her lips. “You do?”

“It all feels so fast, doesn’t it?” Mona frowned with her brows tugging. “Falling for a boy. It’s like your heart’s damn ready to jump right out your chest and you’re fine with it. I feel like a teenager again.” Her mother giggled there, held herself and swooned.

“Oh...oh.” Curls shook out. “Yeah.” Evie put a smile together as Carol instructed. “It’s...something.”

“It’s a little scary, but you gotta just trust yourself. Trust him when your heart leaps out. He’ll catch it for you.” Mona cooed, touching her chest before she picked up a bottle and went back around. “Evie, truth is, I haven’t been this happy in a long time. I feel good about this one. So good. I want things between us to be good, too.”

A hand patted her shoulder. Evie wanted to grab it and fall into Mona’s arms. She didn’t need strong arms, she just wanted her mother. Maybe that could have been enough. She wanted to let her heart leap out when she realized it.

She didn’t trust her mother to catch it.

Dazed, Evie felt the same chill that wafted down from their attic. Wondered what was beyond the shadows in wait. Wondered if it would catch her heart or devour it.

“We’re happier now,” Mona’s smile was all cake batter and frosted buttercream, “aren’t we? We’re better off.”

Evie’s tongue watered for that lost battery. This was all thick cough syrup. Hot cherry bitterness. Spooned down her throat. Spilling like lava. Like bile. Medication to survive another day.

“Yes,” she tried to beam, but it was more of a flicker, “we’re better off now.”

Evie tilted her head back. Stared at painted flowers over the walls. Thought they might be swaying to peel away. Turning to ashes. A cold lump welled in her stomach. Mona’s fingers washing and prepping and perfecting her curls to Baby Jane ringlets.

Finishing, Mona clapped her hands. Pulled her ladies over to preen at her bombshell daughter.

“Look at that, she’s just perfect, ain’t she?” Mona spun Evie’s chair to pull the cape off. “Absolutely beautiful.”

Whatever neon demon was left inside Evie jumped to the surface. Curled lengthy fingers over her shoulders to charge her up and play this game. She fluffed her spun silk hair about. Smelled the products overlapping and sighed.

“Maybe I’ll catch a heart tonight.” Evie’s head tilted. The placid expression on her face turned to marble. She flicked a look over her shoulder. “I love it.”

“Maybe you’ll trust me with your hair again after this.” Mona came to kiss her cheek in passing. Hands rubbing warmth into Evie’s arms. Mother searched Daughter in the reflection and was careful not to look too deeply before she spoke again. “Things are better now, aren’t they?”

That desperation inside Mona to live in her little dollhouses reeled forth. Evie turned to face her, lips spreading over teeth. Syrup in her voice.

“Things are fine, mom,” she came to the mirror to reapply her gloss in prep for Fredrick waiting, “and that’s how they’ll stay.”

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Evie felt her lungs burst upon leaving the front door. She went around until she was out of eyeshot and pressed her back to brick. Heaving. Beautiful there in the wind.

"Fenny!" A call made her squint under the flutters of sunlight. Brock Tannen. Cleaned up as if he wasn't a drunk in deep shit. New watch. Pressed clothing. Evie was too fatigued to run.

"I'm not in the mood." She sneered at him.

"Just looking for conversation. Can't stand my dad's meetings at the bank. Fucking annoying being on his leash." He looked over his shoulder and plucked a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"You smoke now?"

"Helps curve other cravings." He smirked at her. Pretty. "Dolled up and all alone. Wouldn't mind stealing you away. I'll let you make me cookies and wear an apron if you're lucky. Slip you something nice after."

"Yeah. I'm leaving." Evie slid around to head for the corner but he stepped in front of her.

"You know, everything that happened. Not mad anymore. It was all fucked up. The dance. The fight. The whore you sent my way."

"Don't call her a whore." She snapped that at him. Brock was undaunted.

"My therapist is, uh, still working me through things. Apparently, I hate my parents. Shocker." Brock shrugged, not looking at her. Smoke bloomed. "You have that look on your face again. You know that?"

Evie paused, meeting his eyes. Actually intrigued by what he saw inside her.

"What look? A coldness?"

A scoff followed.

“You’re not a real ice queen, Evie, you just play one on public television. No,” he gestured with his cigarette, “that drained, wide eyed look of terror you flashed that night. In the closet. I stumbled in looking for an open bathroom and heard chattering. Found you all curled up. Your friend talked you up, too. Evie Fenny, unashamed of anything. Prettiest exotic doll with a great rack. Also a sensitive baby. Terrified of lightning. Damn storm had the music and lights flickering.”

Brock smiled. Actually looked charming before he offered the smoke. Still a nasty piece of shit.

“C’mon, I’m not trying to fuck with you today. You need it.” He waved it until Evie puffed, snatching it to inhale. Smoke wept inside her lungs. Pulled out glossy lips. Brock’s smile was unchanged. Soft.

“You’re an asshole.”

“I wasn’t that night. Not at first. Admit it.”

“Most guys like you play that. It’s sick.” Evie gave him the cigarette back. Her cherry ripe gloss wrapped around the end. “Nice to get what you want. Mad when we don’t let you touch.”

“Don’t want anything now. Fucked up, but you’re the only person who knows. What I told you that night. It’s all official now. Mom’s on a plane to Italy with dad’s partner as we speak. He didn’t care to mention that and she didn’t care for goodbyes. Gave me a new watch this morning though.”

Evie’s shoulders fell before she leaned back into brick. Eyes sweeping to size him up.

“Parents can be shitty. They fuck up. We pay for it.” She decided and he nodded to agree.

“Fucked up that Evangeline Fenny is my only friend around here.” He exhaled grey.

“I’m not your friend, Brock. You treat people like shit. I’m just

existing here with intimate information. Also, you wanna screw me still.”

“That’s why it’s so fucked up.” He laughed. Loud and boyish. Darling. “Still taste that strawberry from your chapstick that night.”

“I switched to watermelon.”

“Before you freaked on me that is... Why did you freak on me?”

“Sometimes parents fuck us up too. Like I said.” Evie shrugged. He seemed to like that because he offered the smoke again. And Evie took it. Passed it back. “We had that long talk. We kissed. I freaked out and you just...changed. Got handsy and mouthy following me. You said some shitty things.”

“Then, you threw that punch when we got outside. I could see it in your face though, you weren’t even there. I often wondered where you went. Put every guy on my team to shame diving on me like that. Only imagine what you’re like in the bedroom.” He chuckled again recalling it. “I’ll give you something, Evie, you’re a one of a kind girl. Pretty like a stick of dynamite. Hargrove might actually be lucky some days. Heard about the keg king thing. I’m impressed. You’ve never been more fuckable.”

Evie’s head shook, eyes rolling.

“Christ, you have issues. Those few minutes of you not being an asshole, you should go back there.” She spoke. “Might like it.”

“Might have to. I’m being shipped off to some boarding school going into summer. Get my shit together. Not like dad can actually handle this shit. Maybe I’ll get a new watch out of it.”

“Or diamond cufflinks.” Evie’s lips quirked. Encouragement swept his expression. “Listen, the fight. It was you, but it also wasn’t.”

“I know that. I always did.” Brock dropped the cherry to step on it. “I hope that fist finds the right target down the line. I won’t be seeing you around.”

“Good.” Evie almost smiled saying that. Brock looked her up and

down.

“Shame. I almost feel guilty.”

“About what?”

“So long, Fenny. Get home, I can smell the spring storm in the air.” Brock was turning to cross the street. Evie straightened.

“Brock, what’d you do?” Evie saw his face when he turned.

Tired. Unfulfilled. Not regretting much because nothing was to be done. Not for him. He’s wasted himself already. Brock left her with no answer but the pieces came together.

The doors to the bank opened and his dad hurried out, pushing a pair of expensive sunglasses on. Brock got into the car and they didn’t wait before skidding out. Evie narrowed, panning to see the doors bash open a second time. Men clamoring around each other before a body was pushed. Stumbling to avoid hitting the pavement.

Ready to explode, Neil stumbled up in his uniform, losing whatever respect he’d built. A few of his personal items were dumped at his feet to be gathered.

“Oh, fuck.” Evie uttered, barely audible. It all became clear in one instant. Neil Hargrove had just been fired. No longer respected. No longer the breadwinner. “Tannen, what have you done?”

Neil shouted a profanity. All illusions slipping away. That dotting, darling dad. That militant face he showed the world. Crashing. His boss pointed him away as if he were a stray dog trying for a meal. Neil made a beeline for his truck and didn’t see Evie race around the next corner. Fredrick perked upon seeing her. Desperately, she grabbed his hand to tug.

“Take me home!” She begged. Neil’s truck soared by the alleyway, ready to burn what he’d built in the Hargrove house. “Fredrick, please. We’ll talk later, but take me home now!”

He grabbed his keys in response. Over the moon for her.

“Anything for you, Evangeline.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much. I know a lot has changed with me and I, again, will not be active or available on tumblr any longer. All comments and kudos means so much! I hope you continue to hold out and enjoy the story. Hard and hopeful times ahead.

Please feel free to chat and interact with me below. I'd love to talk about the fic. :) xoxo

24. Tyger Tyger, Burning Bright

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone! Thanks for tuning in. Billy and Evie deal with some aftermath and try to hold things together. TW: Mentions of abuse, Pica, fatphobia, Fredrick's bullshit, and violence. Lots of smut to cope tho. Long chapter!

Evie leapt from Fredrick's car with her backpack, making a mad dash.

"Evie!" He called after her.

"Later, god damn it." She hissed and shut the door. To her luck, he drove off in a sweep of exhaust. Evie didn't go home to change and instead went up the steps to the Hargrove house. An hour early. Hair done to perfection.

She knocked. Tried not to bang because Neil's truck beat her home. Something clattered behind the walls. Like a piece of furniture being tossed to the floor. Crashing. Evie raised her hand when the door opened.

"Evie." Susan was deathly pale. Puffy with wiped tears. Trying to smile pleasant and porcelain.

"I'm sorry, I'm early, I was hoping Billy could help me with—"

"Oh, dinner." Susan had a rag wrapped around her hand, she shut the door and nudged Evie to follow her down the steps. "I'm so sorry, I don't want to be rude."

"Are you alright?" Evie cut in, meeting her eyes. Susan flicked her gaze aside. Lips pressing before she nodded.

"I dropped this dish I was going to use. Old thing. It belonged to my grandmother. Just a little cut trying to clean it." Susan sniffled, crushing in on herself. "I'm sorry, Evie, we have to cancel dinner. I really wanted to have you over. We all looked forward to it. I

promise I'll make it up to you."

She'd said that before.

"There's a family matter that came up. I'm so sorry again. We'll do this maybe another week. I'll make something special. But, I have to...to handle this." Susan was almost frantic, feet shifting side to side. She kept looking back at the house. "I have to handle this. Another time. I'll have Billy call you."

"Susan..." Evie trailed off as the mother hurried back toward the house. "If you need anything, I'll be right next door."

Susan's lips pressed.

"I'll handle this. Thank you." She pleaded that, going back to the house. Locking the door. Locking herself inside with the storm that would rage.

Evie shuddered when the door closed. Some muffled shouting resumed. Running now, Evie tossed her backpack aside in the house and locked the front door. She could still hear whatever chaos was cycling within the Hargrove house. Pictured Billy on his knees under the meaty wack of a belt. Max covering her ears in her bedroom, trying not to scream. Susan pleading for it to stop while her hand bled and her eyes turned aside.

Neil raging. Ready to hit the bottle for the night.

Evie yanked for the phone. Closed her eyes to dial. Opening them to see the house next door out the window. Skies dampening. Darkness didn't wash out the fury within. Fingers poised to dial the police. She'd almost done it a few times before. Billy needed her. They'd come and Neil would spin a tale of promises and assurances. Make Billy look like the unstable mad dog.

The phone clicked down. Evie pressed her head to the wall. Followed the dim hallway and felt an ache when Blue didn't come out to greet her. She reached for the chain that would bring the attic down. And the chill with it.

Recoiled.

Evie washed her face. Curls fluffed and wasted. Dressed down to a PJ shirt. Dragged her blanket into her makeshift closet bed. A beat. A sigh. She put the phone close to wait. Ignored her beloved guitar. Heard rain begin to wash out the Hargrove house quarrels while she curled up in the cold. Evie didn't cry. Strangely enough. Not when the rain got harder. Not while Billy was somewhere hurting.

She felt for a screw on the floor. Pressed the sharp tip into her thumb. Just barely. Sharp on her tongue, it sank down. Rougher than gemstones and marbles. A crash of spring rain brought flashes of what she most dreaded. Lightning. Thunder.

Evie cried out, tried to hide her face when she heard a shout under the weather.

"Dad!"

"Billy..." Evie cringed at the clapping of mother nature and shoved up. Thick socks and a long shirt loose on her frame. Cold crept. She skidded at the sounds of closer bellowing. Like wolves snapping and howling. Just outside the Hargrove house now. Evie cracked the front door and saw Billy on the pavement. Having been shoved down.

"Just let me get my keys! It's fucking pouring! I don't have shoes on! Dad!" Billy charged to his feet in jeans and a soaked, white tee. Susan at the door pleading.

"Neil, please, we'll fix this. He's-"

"Get inside." Neil pushed her hard. Slammed the front door in Billy's face. Evie curled behind the door when another loud clap sounded overhead. Breathing in sputters. Heart pounding.

Billy needed her.

"Dad! Let me get my keys! Please!" Billy was pounding on the door. Cursing into rain, he raced to his car parked on the street. Prayed the door was unlocked before he cursed louder and slammed his fists down into the blue. Evie felt herself leap out between flashes of lightning.

"Billy!" She gasped forth. He perked and immediately faced

elsewhere. Turned the side of his face that was pouring red away from her. Wet hands scrambling for his arm. Evie hadn't realized she'd charged out until their skin made contact.

"Come inside with me." Her own clothing soaked. Billy noticed she hadn't put shoes on either.

"Go away, Evie." He snapped that, palm flat on his brow where blood was dripping. "I can handle this."

"What, you gonna walk across town with no shoes in the rain to Tommy's? Just come with me, please."

"Evie, go back inside." A growl kept him from yelling. More thunder. Evie, trying to push through and protect him, instead charged to wrap her arms around his chest. Desperately.

"I'll stay out here as long as you! I don't care! I'll die out here with you!" She proclaimed. Crying. Billy felt her body trembling. Nerves and muscles tightening into his. Both of them on the fritz. Her curls ruined, she still caught a heart and wasn't letting go. "Please...come inside with me. You're bleeding all over. It's freezing. You don't have to tell me. Please."

"Fuck." Billy hissed. Stumbling a little before he was pushing Evie to go. Neil wasn't opening that door for him. Soaked to the bone, they went into the Fenny house. Dripping all the way to the bathroom. Evie sat Billy by the bathtub and pressed a towel to his right brow. Saw a nasty cut through it that would scar.

"Fucking freezing. Our heat's all messed up. Mom's getting it fixed. I can...fuck, just underdress. I'll dry our clothing."

Billy didn't move, breathing rigid. Teeth bared, ragged exhales that sucked in shaky.

"He lost his job." The words piled out.

"Billy-"

"My dad lost his fucking job. They found alcohol in his locker. Not up to security guard code. Never seen him bring that shit to work,

he's only bad at home. He takes everything seriously. Someone fucked him over. Fuck... Fuck!" Billy squeezed his eyes shut. Pink water dripping down his chin. Shirt stained. Almost tie-dye looking. Evie had one hand on his knee and the other helping him hold the towel to his face.

"Tannen did this or his father. I saw him today. He said...I don't know. I don't. His dad has influence. Fuck, I'm sorry. I tried to race home."

"I'll fucking-

"Save it, he's on his way out of Ridgemont." Evie winced when she got a look at Billy's gash.

"We're fucked. My dad's a fucking drunk, he's gonna spiral. Susan...she...she's gonna try to find work. We could lose our shitty ass house. So much for their fresh start away from Cali." Billy laughed. He laughed loud and manic. Until he had to catch some more air.

"That won't happen." Evie met his eyes. Another cringe at the storm outside. Damp curls fell over her shoulder. She shook there and Billy stilled. His hands came up as Evie tried to stop the bleeding. Without speaking, Billy covered her ears. Thumbs smoothing. "You don't have to."

"I know." Billy mouthed. Evie crawled to lay into him. Wet fabrics clinging and twisting around. They got silent. Held each other as the worst of the storm passed over. Another few crashes made the lights flicker. They just burrowed into each other. Breathing. Trying to mellow it out. Evie wiped crusting blood from Billy's jaw and neck. Nodded as the rain eased slightly.

"I'm okay. Let me clean this up." Evie tilted Billy's face.

"Did he hurt you?" The question got hard. Eyes searing and Evie avoided the stare.

"Yes." She swallowed. "A little bit. Just talk."

Billy's gave this little scrunch. Evie crawled for the first aid kit. Let him take it.

“I’d rather do it myself.” Billy sifted through items.

Evie reached up for the sink, grasped a handheld mirror to wordlessly hold it toward him. Tension sprang. Billy glanced at himself there in the reflection as if she was making him look. Really look. He spied Evie then continued to patch his brow.

“Fucker got me good. Threw Susan’s god damn ugly dish at my face. Could have blinded me. Motherfucker. If we didn’t need the money, I would have laughed in his face. Getting thrown out of work. Perfect man and father. Being seen for the shithead he is. God, I wish I was a fly on the wall in that meeting, Evie.” Billy muttered to himself, ruefully bandaging his eyebrow. “Comes home swinging and I egged him on, I guess.”

“Where’s Max?”

“In bed. No way she’ll leave her room, I shoved her in there quick. Susan will make sure of that. I thought Neil was gonna break her arm so I grabbed him. He picked up the dish and smashed it at me. Same move my mother used to do on him. She fought back, you know. Hit him back. Spat. I think he liked it.” Billy wiped his nose so Evie set the mirror aside and closed the kit up. “He’d not gonna try hard to find another job yet, he’s fucked up. Bet you people are already talking about it. Good luck getting him to leave the house for a while. He deserves it.”

“We’ll figure this out.”

“You’re gonna stay out of it. Let it cool down. Susan will get something to get us by. I’ll find something after school.” Billy peeled his shirt off as Evie coaxed him. “Don’t fucking gawk at me.”

It was apparent why. Neil slashed at him all over with the belt. Swipes of red scattered his frame. Billy contained the pain to his eyes as the adrenaline started to wear off.

“I’m not.” Evie snapped her eyes aside. Fumbling, she didn’t stop Billy from undressing her as well. Naked bodies in the artificial light. Unable to hide.

A pile of soaked clothing got settled aside. Evie reached for it when Billy caught her wrist. Got closer to him. Bright lights still washing them out. His pendant stuck to his collar. She stared at him. Waiting for another snippy order, but his pupils blew out. Eyes weighted. Something shifted in Billy to cope.

“Wanna fuck you right here.” He kissed her down into tile. Shivering bodies molding together.

“Wait. I...” Evie shook her head and Billy got off her. “You’re just riled up. It’s freezing.” She stood nude to go put their clothing in the washer. Billy followed. Moved her curls aside to kiss her neck.

“Wanna feel something, Evie.” Billy caught her lips as her head tilted.

“Am I cold?”

“No.” Billy pushed her into the vibrating machine. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Evie swallowed at his hands roaming. She took him into her body. Billy draped himself over her, guiding her hand back into his hair so she’d tug. Kisses and suckles mingled along her neck and spine.

“You’re so fucking warm, Eves.” Billy said that as if he could live inside her. Hips rutting hard. Evie brought his hand up. Got him to squeeze her neck. Billy’s arms were around her. Holding her. Lips at her ear as they scrambled to move against each other. She could still smell the rustic blood on him. Taste it on his mouth.

Evie suckled his fingers, let him run the digits over plump lips. The machine under them shook and rocked; Billy slamming her into it. She felt her thighs shake, unfurling as a hand pushed between them to feel her slick. Mashed together, hair was pulled and Billy gave this strangled cry into her shoulder. He whined and tried to warn her. Arms trapping Evie against the machine still rocking. She realized he was mumbling into damp curls. Hot puffs eliciting from both of them. Steamy into flesh.

“Not gonna hurt you. Not gonna be like that. I won’t...” Billy

exhaled. "Won't ever do that."

She pushed up a little to capture his lips, silencing his worries. Drinking them down in the hopes that they wouldn't hurt him any longer.

"Let's go to bed," Evie pawed and tried to push up. Sore. Foreheads pressed together. "C'mon." She took Billy by the hand, felt him still vibrating. "We gotta get warm." They made it to her room on shaken feet. Evie dug into an untouched part of her closet for some old garments. She tossed a pair of sweatpants at Billy.

"Small enough. Use the tie." A long-sleeved tee followed. Light grey with the Everlast logo across the front. "That's too small for me, thrifted find. Get dressed."

Billy just looked at her as if she'd grown another head.

"It's too cold, you're lucky I'm not wrestling you into one of my cat sweaters." Evie huffed and pulled on a sweatshirt, undies, and flannel pants. Billy got a little huffy but covered himself, eyes shifting.

"Are you sleeping in the closet?" Rain beat behind them, softer than before. Billy gestured to her makeshift bed and Evie winced.

"It's just something I do on occasion." She plucked up her blankets and stole an extra one from the closet to make the bed.

"Why?"

"I don't know, I just need to do it sometimes. Feels safer." Evie felt his eyes on her back and didn't turn. She put a bottle of aspirin on the side table. "You'll be needing that."

Billy ignored the pills as Evie went to her shelves, plucked up an old Polaroid camera. Lips blew a coating of dust from it.

"Can you take my picture?" She turned with a monotone. Messy ringlets all over her shoulders and a fatigued expression.

"Why?" Their hands touched as she pushed the camera at him.

"I just wanted to see something for myself." That coldness.

Billy lifted the lens without ceremony as Evie stayed put, angled slightly to stare pointed down the line before he snapped a photograph and plucked it with his fingers.

"I think I moved," he lifted for a second and then said, "you're beautiful."

Evie felt the warmth of a tug before the flash captured it exactly as it lay. Scattering cosmos over her like a thin veil. Billy smirked a little to himself, fanning both photos without looking at them. He offered them over.

"Tell me if you find what you're looking for in either." One hand set the camera aside before he kissed her. Taking her chin to make the point. Evie decided not to look at the pictures, leaving them blindly on her shelf. She tumbled into bed with him, pressed between his body and the wall.

"We'll figure this out." She promised when Billy's mouth left hot exhales on her neck.

He made this rumbling sound, body covering her. Shielding Evie from whatever would come out of the darkness or light. She tucked curls from his bruised face and settled her hands on his shoulders. Fingers deft and exploring. Soothing. Lazing between her thighs, Billy hovered there.

"I told you I'd help keep you away from him and you know it's gonna be harder now." Braced on his elbows, he nuzzled their noses together. Shifting to trail across her cheek and jaw.

"You have a life, Billy, I can handle mine. Focus on you and Max, we'll help each other when we can. Fredrick trapped himself in a weird spot, he has no idea how overbearing and clingy my mother will get with him. Might be an odd help."

One hand swept over his chest before he peered at the shirt.

"That looks nice on you." Evie crumbled a fistful of fabric, brought their mouths together. Hips rocked the same as waves on ocean

shores. Billy gave this sigh into her mouth, shaking because she was beautiful and he was weak for her. Pleasure burned down Evie's nerves like sparking fuses. Headed to dynamite.

Billy grumbled something about making him get dressed before his hands were under her shirt. Resting on her breasts. Thumbing circles.

"You're warm." He mumbled into the fabric. Evie gave this length sigh, head tilting back as she rubbed down his biceps.

"I made us get dressed for a reason." Teeth sank into her bottom lip. Billy played dumb with a shrug, draped over her.

"Just trying to heat us up quicker." He bunched the knit fabric up, hips rolling now. "Friction." Evie whimpered sweetly, opened her mouth for his tongue.

"You're gross." She cupped Billy's face to steady him and placed a kiss upon his bandaged brow. They rolled on their sides, intertwined. "You can keep that if you like. The shirt. Make it a summer crop."

Evie tried to lighten the mood and found his hand. Fingers laced. Lips swollen from kisses collided together. His hands felt around her flesh under the top, pulling Evie in so they could burn together. A tremor ran his spine.

"Something to look forward to." She leaned in and kissed near the bandage again, tucking Billy safely into her soft edges. Uttering. "Don't pull from us."

Billy's eyes shifted to see her. Broken.

"What'd I do so wrong, Evie?" The ocean blue flooded and Evie pressed into him before he could run.

"Nothing." She held him, arms shifting to bring him in. Chin resting atop his head. Billy didn't delve further. He clung to her, face pushed into her neck so he could stay muffled. Fingers left imprints into skin. Evie took him into her warmth. Wrapped around Billy's frame.

"Sing me something." Lips brushed at her collar. Evie smiled into

his curls.

"Billy's gotta gun..." She murmured, *"he's on the run."* A snort erupted from him, tickling her skin. "What, you like Def Leppard?"

"I meant more of an Evie song." He shifted further into her so Evie was on her back. Bodies warming. "Your feet are freezing."

"Was sorta hoping you'd warm my legs up." They brought the blankets a little higher. Matching sighs. Evie played with his hair, tracing fingertips over the shell of his ear. Down his cheek and jaw. "I'll sing in a bit. Just wanted to hold you for a moment. That okay?"

"We'll see." Billy pushed closer if that were possible. Muscled arms closing tighter. "Why do you sleep in the closet, Evie?"

"Hiding from thunder. There's more in my life than I like to admit." Evie felt her chest sink, eyes fluttering when Billy's lips trailed up her collar. "Feels like I'm just now remembering it."

** **

"Another double for Susan, tonight?" Evie unpacked her lunch. Noticed Billy was sitting in front of nothing again. They snagged the table first as she sifted through what was packed.

"You know Neil actually talked down to her for the gig at Big Buy? Drunk as a skunk on the couch, he bitched about food and her discount and how his wife was a damn cashier." Billy rubbed his eyes. They needed to conserve food in their house until Susan's first check so he ate very little. Starved. Tired. Sinking.

He kept Max fed. Washed their clothing. Picked up the house. Mostly his dad's empties. All the while Neil stunk and snapped at him. Billy refused to tell Evie what job he'd picked up in the evening and pushing got him snarling like a dog. It was plucking him by the nerves. She asked once and didn't press it again.

"My mother insists on making my lunch these days cause she thinks I'm not eating or something. Keeps making extra. Here." Evie was passing a sandwich and pear over. It wasn't a lie. Also wasn't the whole truth. Her eating habits had been...spotty.

Not that Evie also hadn't mentioned the Hargrove kids were starting to starve this past week. Mona picked that up quick. Susan working herself to the bone while her husband sat on the couch and drank and barked. They scrounged through old cans and dry cereal.

"Last night," Billy didn't fight the offered food and ravaged it in seconds, "I'm not making that a habit. What happened."

"Already told you not to worry about it. You can sneak Max into my window anytime." Evie leaned over. She wasn't sleeping well either between Fredrick's eyes always on her and Mona nagging for some fancy dinner they wanted. Family time. Nauseating, face-cracking family portraits. "You were right about the kicking. She's a little angry caterpillar in her sleep. Wiggling around."

Eyes lifted. Something lightening when they connected.

"Susan and I both have paychecks coming and she gets her discount now. We'll get some actual food in the house." Billy rubbed his temple, juice dripping down his palm as he devoured the bright green fruit. They went silent as their friends joined the table. Mindless chatter that distracted neither of them.

"Billy, you working late tonight?" Heather piped up. Billy crossed his arms over the table, eyes elsewhere before he nodded.

"It's Friday and Tommy's parents are doing a date weekend for their anniversary. She can stay with us at his place." Carol winked. "We'll keep the heat down."

"We will?" Tommy had joked before Carol smacked his chest. "We absolutely will." His tone changed.

"Yeah, we're not subjecting Evie to that, my place is open and her cat misses her." Steve crunched on a carrot stick, elbows up on the table.

"Might be late. I, ah, have a dinner thing with my mom."

"And Bowers?" Billy perked.

"She's been pushing it. Just dinner and then I'll sneak out." Evie

picked her sandwich apart and didn't look at anyone. When the eyes blared too deep, she pushed the rest of her meal at Billy and got up. Often it felt like fireworks were going off in her face. "Need some water."

"Evie?" Heather stood up but Evie was already pushing out the door. Sneakers moving until she was bracing her hands on a drinking fountain down the way.

Stomach wringing around in a squelch, Evie pushed her fingers into the tender spot. Sweat beaded up from her scalp. A long drink of water followed and she tried to breathe through the worst of it. Waited for the pain to subside. Which it did eventually.

"Evie." Billy spotted her down the hallway. "Listen, I could...get someone to cover for me."

"Billy, no." Evie pressed her palms flat against his chest. Felt the big hummingbird rattling his ribs. He flickered her eyes over her greying expression a few times.

"Are you feeling okay?" Billy lifted his hands to her face. Cool skin brushed up her temples. "You're warm."

"Just coming down with a bug or something. I'm fine." Evie closed her fists against his chest, nestled closer so he'd get the hint and hold her. Which he did without question. "I'm fine." She said again. "I've been avoiding him. We're doing it. My mother won't leave him alone so he's had to leave me alone."

Billy cupped Evie's face again, tilting it to quiet the chatter. She struggled but met his eyes, fingers curling around Billy's wrists.

"The words sound so funny after saying it too much. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine." Her drones like the rhythmic banging of a head into drywall. Evie actually laughed with watery eyes. "I'm fine. God, when did my life get so fucked up? It wasn't just Fredrick... I wish I went to that hotel with you on New Years."

Billy made this sound that might have steered toward amusement. Sighing out, he tucked Evie back under his chin. Arms slid under his

jacket to curl into the heat. Playfully, he covered her in the leather of his jacket, bringing her into a protective shroud. Pretending it was enough. Evie held him like it might be.

“I keep thinking about something before all of this. When I was little and my dad was always gone and back again for a short time. Like a dream or a memory.” Evie shut her eyes to wince, opened them and shuddered before she straightened up to see Billy again. The dream washed away. “When you snuck Max in, I smelled alcohol on her breath. She wasn’t acting like herself.”

“She found a bottle in my room. I already got on her about it. It won’t happen again. Neil’s got her all messed up. I can handle it.” Billy thumbed the corner of her mouth to fix the cherry shade there.

“It’s not fair that I can ask you for help and not return it.” Evie clutched at Billy’s leather, to bring him down for a gentle kiss. His eyes were still closed as she pulled back like he might be dreaming too.

“Well, now you don’t owe me anything.” Billy hummed, forehead tilting to touch hers. These cherished minutes they got to steal together where nothing else existed. Wisps of blond curls tickled her skin. Something tender flooded his tone. Billy opened his eyes to see the girl there waiting, one finger lifted to tuck her hair back. “Should have run away with you.”

“When?”

“Every time we got into my car. That first night after I saw you sing in those blue moon lights. We could have rolled the windows down and kept driving.”

“Back to Cali?”

“Anywhere, there’s lots of ocean.” Billy’s lips lifted, eyes on her hair again while he played with an idle piece. “We could live on a boat for all I care.”

“I could sing with the waves wherever I wanted. Learn to swim. We’ll find you a cheap typewriter and you’ll write stories for me.

Might be nice to skate along the boardwalk. Share the biggest plate of cheese fries with extra fresh jalapenos. Hot dates nights in cheap motels with the neon coming through the window.” As Evie made wishes, they seemed further away.

Max was here. Mona was here. Running from Fredrick and Neil felt so conditional. Not without consequences.

She frowned and looked up at Billy again.

“I’m not gonna let anyone hurt you.” She touched his face and Billy cracked this smile. “What? I mean that.”

“I know you do, Evie.” Billy took her chin between two fingers and the moment was torn into as the bell rang. Quick before their world was overrun, Evie came up on her toes to steal his lips. Fingers up into Billy’s hair, behind his neck to bring him in. Her pinkie ran along the chain under his shirt.

“I’m gonna keep you safe, too.” Evie promised against his mouth as the doors started to open. She came down, spinning on her heel again to disappear into the crowd. Curls bouncing in her wake.

** ** *

Mona’s high school gushing brought out one connection between Evie and Fredrick. It annoyed the ever-loving shit outta them both. Mona would preen and hang off Fredrick’s arm. So proud to be there with her little wiggling strut in platform heels.

And he would look to Evie as if for help. She’d only smile because he deserved this. In fact, she encouraged it through the girl talk her mother so desired of her. She and Carol would pay visits to the salon after school when Billy was working. Giggle and pout about life and boys.

Mona ate it up. Carol was better at it, she and Mona spoke the same language. Evie did her best not to resent that. It wasn’t Carol’s fault she was designed to be someone’s daughter. Mona loved to hover and pamper. Carol loved to be hovered and pampered over like a beauty queen. Evie just liked to find the spotlight for herself. All

such womanhood was valid. Evie just wished they lined up better when she saw Carol and Mona bond like that.

The car rumbled along the highway. Evie pressed her hot temple to the cool glass, breath cast dew across it. Fredrick's shiny red Plymouth with two bright headlights like furious eyes took them out of town. Into the city. Light whirled past looking like shooting stars. Evie lifted a hand to the glass hoping to catch one before she drew a heart into her fading breath.

They parked at some hefty family restaurant. Friendliest roadhouse Evie's ever seen. Huge spinning neon sign with some flickering spots that were threatening to go out. *Traveling Man*.

Jack and Mona Fenny used to dance around to the Dolly song of the same name. Evie would watch them in the living room. Wishing a boy would dance with her like that. Hearts in his eyes. Behind her, a chill from the open attic rolled over her shoulders.

"I'm starved." Mona pulled Fredrick in for a kiss and pinched his cheek before getting out. Once the door shut, he turned to her.

"She never quits."

"You're perfect for each other in that light." Evie shoved out, tights shifting. She wore a nice velvet black dress at Mona's urging. Velvet in the bodice and a short full skirt in a satin plaid. Ruffling her curls into the evening breeze, she followed after her mother when Fredrick came to Mona's side. Taking her hip to be the doting boyfriend.

Evie frowned and they went inside. Dark lit and busy. Smoke in the air. Booths as far as the eyes can see with a rowdy bar. Aerosmith played over the speakers. A tiny hostess showed them to a table and handed out vaguely sticky menus to match the dark tabletop. Cowboy and old western memorabilia decorated the walls. Their wall was decorated in huge, old belt buckles.

Glasses and cutlery scratched around them. Nails on a chalkboard. Families laughing to enjoy meals like a bunch of barn animals. Evie wanted to cover her ears and scream. Mona giggled and nudged into Fredrick across the booth.

The menu lifted so Evie didn't have to see them flirt.

Their waitress, older woman with a massive netted beehive hairdo, came for drink orders. Evie remembered Bubbles and hoped she was warm somewhere. Hoped she'd mended her relationship with her own daughter.

"Water, please."

"We're celebrating, Evie, get a milkshake." Mona waved her manicured hand around, bracelets clicking together.

"You can afford it, Evie." Fredrick smiled there. Evie glowered at him.

"Water's fine, with lemon." She shifted under everyone's gaze before the waitress was off.

"With lemon. Miss Fancy Pants. ...How're things with Billy?" Mona asked, flicking a burgundy napkin into her lap.

"Fine."

"You know, I think it'd be so fun to go dress shopping. Us and Carol, she's got a million gowns circled in that magazine of hers that she brought into my salon." Mona chattered while Fredrick stretched to put his arm over her shoulders. Eyes on Evie when a bread basket and drinks were set down.

To seem normal enough, Evie snatched one to pick at. Nibbling like a squirrel.

"Graduation is soon, Evie," Fredrick addressed her, "must be thinking about what's coming after."

"Evie's going to take a few classes, keep up her education. We're going to find her a talent agent. See about getting my girl in a recording studio. I remember researching for myself when I was a beauty queen." Mona inserted herself. "But, before all that, I think a nice vacation is in order. The three of us. We could be a family. Take a little road trip down to Florida. See the beach. Freddy and I have been planning it and I just can't wait."

Evie stared at Fredrick. Easy way for him to separate them and sweep Evie off. Anywhere in the world. Leave poor Mona sobbing in a hotel room to stress smoke herself to death.

“Actually, I was hoping for a quiet summer with my friends and boyfriend. And my music.”

“Oh, it won’t be longer than a week.” Mona plucked up her lime-colored umbrella drink to sip. Fredrick folded his hands.

“We’re just thinking of you, Evie.” His pleasant smile had her fingers curling tighter around her glass. Threatening to break it. She sipped and crunched on an ice cube. Mona shot her a look at the harsh sound.

“We can talk about it.”

“I know you don’t like fuss, baby, but you’ll have to get used to some of it.” Mona swished her drink, exhaling. So contented here. “There is something else we’re celebrating.”

“What is it?” Evie pushed, taking another long drink.

“I took an offer from the Mayor. I’m moving my salon into the mall. I know what I said, but it’s a bigger space and the offer was generous. So, we’re celebrating the fresh start. The real fresh start.” She looked to Fredrick and beamed. “Don’t think I’m selling out. I gave Mayor Kline a list of demands.”

“That’s good.” Evie offered slowly. “That’s great, mom. It’ll be fun. New space.”

Frankly, she wasn’t sure how to react. Just another change. Another direction for the world to turn. Another project to keep Mona’s attention off her.

“Now, I have Claudia and the girls holding down the fort so don’t you worry at all. You focus on school and friends. But, I have a lot of oversee to handle while we prep to have this thing open.”

“So, you’ll be gone a lot.” Evie produced, eyes on Bowers.

“Yes, and I know you have a lot on your plate. Poor baby Blue running away and prom. We’ll figure this out.”

“I got it, mom.”

“And Fredrick is here too. For both of us.” Mona further gushed. Evie went for another ice cube and the waitress saved her from responding. Fredrick sat back with his hands clasped, perfectly content as well.

“Just, ah... Chicken Caesar salad, please.” Evie blurted the first thing she saw on the menu. The waitress took the sticky plastic slabs and went off. Mona frowned.

“Evie, are you feeling okay?” Mona’s brow lifted and she didn’t side look Fredrick before she launched into worried mother talk. “You’re not trying to lose weight for a boy, are you?”

“Mom!” Evie snuffed herself, cringing back.

“I just mean, Billy’s a very good-looking boy and young girls get caught up in-”

“You don’t have to comment on every single thing I eat, I get enough stares no matter what. Cheeseburger or salad, it doesn’t matter, I get judged regardless.” Evie crossed her arms, sitting back in a huff because she was starving and nauseous all at once.

“We’re just looking out for you, Evie.” Fredrick mirrored himself from about two minutes prior. Repetition. She hated him. Hated him so much. Every day was agony. “You’ve both seen so much change. Let’s just enjoy a nice dinner, huh? My girls.”

Unable to contain herself, Evie kicked him in the shin. Fredrick made a sound he covered with a cough and put his arm back around Mona. Pulled her in close for a kiss. Evie felt her cheeks blush with fury and turned aside. Looked at the other happy tables before her expression fell.

Billy. In dirty slacks and a black tight tee. Grey apron tied around his waist. Curls pulled back with one of Evie’s stolen scrunchies. Hard and intent as he bused a table quickly, dropping dirty plates into a

tub of water.

Some young businessmen passed to their table. Smoking and laughing on the way as Billy turned to go to his next messy booth. The smallest of the pack gave him a shove like he was trash. Knocked Billy into the table and sent nasty water down his front.

Any other day, Billy Hargrove would have taken that fucker out with one hard punch. But, Evie understood that he needed this shitty job and needed to play along to keep the last strings of his life tied together.

Fredrick and Mona chattered and Evie just watched him. Understood why he didn't want to tell her as another manager berated him for being clumsy and pointed to the floor. Shame. Obedient and fuming, Billy lowed to his knees and bowed like a muzzled dog to clean the mess there. Got kicked by another suit. People who treated the poor same as dirt in their shoe.

Billy's muscles bulged. He glared at the floor and gathered himself to get up. Went to another table next to a full booth of laughing girlfriends. Women in their late-thirties enjoying some kind of margarita night. Drunk laughter as they swayed and sank huge, colorful drinks in too many colors.

"Hey baby," one woman reached over the booth and gave Billy's ass a slap. Evie flinched, disgusted. "Running outta room here, Bon Jovi."

Wordless, he flashed a stony expression by force and turned to pluck up their many empties.

"You're so drunk, he doesn't look like Bon Jovi. He's yummier." A second sucked suggestively from her curly straw.

"I'll say," the first leaned forward and flashed her cleavage in a neon blue number. "For your trouble. Come visit the table again, I might have something better in it for you."

She reached her hand covered in rings to tug at Billy's belt before she shoved a bill down his front. Girls cackled around her. Billy's

hands went up, flushing and disgusted, before he plucked up his tub and turned.

Immediately meeting Evie's eyes.

Caught, she stared back. Wanted to run into his arms and hold him and be held. Billy's bright blue eyes slid away. Shame washed over him same as that dingy water. He scurried away and Evie shifted to follow before the waitress blocked her.

"The food! This looks delish." Mona clapped her hands together when plates were set down. "Thank you, dear. Evie, dig in."

Evie crunched on her salad, shoveling it into her mouth. Eyes flickering to the door Billy disappeared too. She lingered to watch the table of prattling older women in their drunken games.

"What do you think, Evie?" Fredrick spoke, idle.

"Yeah, sure." She hadn't been listening to anything. Eyes still glued to the older woman who'd groped her boyfriend. A single flame licked her heart before it engulfed everything else.

"Wonderful, we'll go tomorrow. See a movie. It'll be great to spend time together while Mona's out."

"What?" Evie locked back in. Eyes widening.

"I'll let you pick the movie if I pick the snacks. Only fair." He chuckled there, bright as can be. Evie exhaled something heavy.

Fuck.

She stared at them. Helpless. Ashamed. Stuck.

Across the way, the pervert got up from her seat. The world tolled in another direction. Dripping scarlet red. Raging hellfire wailing all down her flesh and bone.

Evie looked down at her hands and saw fists. Remembered Brock's palm on her knee trying to push. Remembered Fredrick holding her down to make love. Remembered a cold chill and a series of flashes.

A poem her father used to read to her when she was young and fearful to lose his warmth. His mouse.

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

“I have to use the restroom.” Evie got up, fizzling and numb. Not looking at anyone else. Intent on prey because she was an apex predator under silk and blush and velvet. Under stardust tangerine dreams and peachy vanilla skies that pulled toward an endless sunset. She was the spotlight beaming to burn and pull the world to their feet. Exposing stars that would collide and burst. Flame and fire and desire.

*In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?*

Brown eyes darkened at the woman's back. Same as the evil headlights on Fredrick's horrid red Plymouth. Evie's expression contorted. Her pretty curls and dress bouncing. She glowered. The woman had no idea and that thrilled. No name. No past. Only a face. A face and hands that touched. Oh, so fragile.

*And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?*

Evie stalked. Felt that same impulse to punch Brock welling in her

every joint. Red filled the voids. Nowhere to put it. So, she swallowed it down with pins and shards and gems. Nothing was enough to make her feel full again. Feel right. Feel real. Feel human. Just the neon demon blaring to be greater until every eye was upon her. Nothing was better.

What the hammer? what the chain,

In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? what dread grasp,

Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

No one was looking at Evangeline as she followed the woman around back. No one saw sweet little mouse grab for hairspray matted locks, shoving her out a back door into the alleyway.

When the stars threw down their spears

And water'd heaven with their tears:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

A yelp hit the sky before Evie welled and drew her fist back. She was no mouse.

Tyger Tyger burning bright,

In the forests of the night:

What immortal hand or eye,

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Punches wept rubies upon her knuckles. Evie growled and snapped. Knees wet from the pavement. Tights ripping. The drunk woman put up her arms to cower, shooting away when Evie stood over her. She touched Tommy's knife in her pocket and watched the woman cry and plead. Red washed away kindness and empathy. Tucked them

aside to rest. A couple kicks cut sound from the cold air. Evie sneered at her, came back to herself and didn't take the blade out.

"Touch that boy again," she said with her teeth and talons bared, "and I'll blind you."

"Crazy bitch. Okay, okay! Just...stop, please. I'll leave right now..."

Evie was already turning to go back inside as the woman scrambled off. Sprinting like her sad, little life depended on it. Eyes closed to inhale.

Smoke blew in her face.

"Billy." She puffed, coming down from the high. Back to her stomach that was in knots and judgmental eyes on what she put into her mouth. Billy stood there with a stick between his lips. Casual. Unbothered.

"I have fifteen minutes. C'mon." Billy tugged her into another side door, flicking his smoke aside. He snuck Evie into an open janitor's closet and put her hands under the sink. She hissed at a rush of cold water.

"Listen, I don't..."

"Yeah, you do. You know exactly what that was. What came over you. I saw it in you, chica. Long time ago. We're the same, maybe you used to resent that." Billy massaged her buzzing hands. "Get some ice when you get home."

"I wish you told me," Evie smoothed out her dress, "it's a job."

"Don't want my girl seeing me get stepped on by uppity assholes." Billy panned to see her face. "You okay? Better?"

"Shockingly, a little." She paused, chest sinking. Chilling. "I feel fucking amazing. Is that bad?"

"Not like I'm in a place to judge." He brought Evie's hands to his lips, kissed them slowly. All better. "Listen, what you saw, it's not always...like that."

“Not good though?”

“You didn’t order beef, pork, or anything hot, right?” Billy gave a squint and Evie’s face twisted to match him.

“...Salad.”

“Good. Thank god.” Billy winked. “Kidding...but still don’t eat anything else. Except dessert, they get it from somewhere else.”

Evie pushed into him in response, pecking his cheek.

“I’m gross.”

“I like it.” Evie muttered against him, wiping her hands. They peered at each other seeming to find that common ground they kept landing on together. “Mom and Fredrick are talking summer vacation plans.”

“You’re not leaving Hawkins with them. No fuckin’ way.”

“Just talk, we’ll figure it out. She hangs from him, it’s disgusting and oddly helpful. But, problem. She’s moving the salon to the mall. Which means-”

“Fuck. Bet, Bowers was pushing because that’ll keep her busy.” Billy checked his watch. “Go to Harrington’s tonight, I’ll meet you.”

“I have something tomorrow now.” Evie frowned. “Movies thing with...”

“Is Mona going?”

Evie’s expression answered that.

“Evie.” He snipped, eyes darting outside to make sure no one was looking for him. He pushed the door shut and locked it.

“I’ll pick a new flick. We drive to a crowded theater, we go home. I rush out.” Evie gave a sharp exhale.

“I picked up a shift, I’ll meet you around six tomorrow.” Billy stole

her face forward for a kiss. "Don't tell the others about this."

"I won't."

Something shuddered in the air. Steamed in. Evie was still catching her breath when Billy was on her. She vibrated. Met his filthy kiss head on.

"That was so hot out there." Neither cared about the carnage, it welled pleausrably hellfire under marrow. Crawling up to fizzle and light the sky up. "My fucking girl."

"Yours." Evie clung and begged. "And you're all mine." Billy hummed, licked into her mouth. Hands palmed and pushed skirts up, bodies knocking together.

"Fucking, yes, I am. Evie." Billy checked his watch and let Evie feel up his shirt. "Gonna get off to that image of you pounding all my monsters into little pieces." He pushed into her. Dropped to his knees. "Gotta few more minutes." Muffled sounds went under her skirt. Billy tore the seam of her tights.

"I still have to go back to my table!" Evie gasped, braced up on the old sink. Heaving for air at him.

"Hide it with your skirt." Billy stretched fabric aside. "My girl deserves a treat."

Deft fingers pressed their way up fleshy thighs. Under a lace waistband on her hips. Billy nudged her legs apart. Evie tilted her head back. Felt him kiss her mound and moan. Slipping that hot tongue against her bud. Knees quivered.

"Billy." She shuddered. Grasping his curls for more, tangling the ponytail together. Billy kissed her deeply. Blue eyes lifted in a way that was sweet and obedient. Mouth buried between her legs. "Not gonna be able to hold myself up." His hands gripped her hips in response, pressed her further onto the sink. Evie combed fingers into styled blond locks. Heard a wet pop as he leaned out to meet her eyes when she dared to glimpse him again.

Playfully, Billy ghosted a smile and bit into her thigh. Pulled a hiss

before Evie stole his chin between two fingers. Thumbed his slick, pink lips until Billy took the digit into his mouth.

"You're so beautiful." She mused. Billy, too obscene and pretty for mortal eyes. Honey glow skin. Ethereal ocean eyes framed in lashes that were thick enough to make any girl jealous. "You're so good. You know, I'd probably do anything for you. You realize that?"

"Hmm. Feeling is mutual, Eves," Billy tilted to kiss her hand. "Say that again." He opened his jeans. Stroked himself a couple times for her just to show how hard he was. Another lingering kiss into her mound. "Say it, Evie. Tell me how good I am."

"You're so fucking good." She sighed for him. Made his heart soar. "So good for me." Billy's hot breath swept when he chuckled. Shuddering. Tip leaking all over the floor. Arousal now dripped shamelessly from his chin while he spread her open for another taste.

"Evie." Billy sucked her inner thigh hard enough to leave a mark that would blush violet. She shivered, managing to see his eyes again. Blinking and innocent. "I want you to use me." The fingers in his hair tightened in response. Billy's eyes clouded. Got heavier. "Fucking use me, angel."

"Keep eating me. Please," Evie's head fell back. Lips opening soundless when his tongue lashed against her. Slipping over her clit before he spread her again. Pushed two fingers into the knuckle until thighs shook. She moaned, legs twitching open to take him. Mouth and fingers. She pulled his hair, felt him vibrate. Billy came up, hurried.

"Running outta time." He grabbed for her thighs. Let her wrap around him before he was fucking her into the sink. Boxes rumbled and items fell to the floor.

"You're good," Evie was mumbling in the high, "you're perfect. Billy." She clenched him. Found release and coaxed him to follow after. Caressed in neon heat. Fingernails drove into his shoulders. "Gotta get back. Fuck."

"Little more." Billy stayed wedged against her, stealing a kiss. "My

starlet. My little songbird. My angel." He mused. Stupid happy. Beyond words. Still spilling them out for her regardless. Evie unfurled there holding him. Sweet nothings turning her to putty. "My very own star I plucked down."

"Making me blush too much," she chided, "talking like that."

"My goal in life." Came the joke, nose pushing into her hair. "We both know you're not shy, Eves."

"You have," Evie's eyes rolled when he kissed her neck, "an effect." Billy hummed, liking that. "When you talk sweet like that. When you touch me... Billy, that stuff about...using you."

"Just revved." He touched their head, shaking his. "Not that I don't love being on my knees for my girl."

"C'mere," Evie pulled him down by the tee, kissing his brow. "I gotta get back to the table. Hit the bathroom and clean up."

"Thinking about you going back to the table with my cum inside you. Fuck. Could lick it out if you like." Billy fixed himself and then tried to pull Evie's torn tights back up. She pushed at his chest.

"Gross." A smile cracked before she was swaying to peck his mouth. "Still like it. I gotta go. Meet me at Steve's tonight."

"Tasting you just might get me to the end of this shift." Billy opened the door to peek out. He winked and Evie brushed by him to go first, jumping as he slapped her bottom. She beamed again, happy in every stolen moment they caught. Like stars from the sky. Billy's eyes lingered, the healing scar in his brow gave him an edge. "See you later."

Curls flying, Evie bounded off. Rushed to clean up in the bathroom. Thighs humming. Obscenely wet still. Swollen and kissed to near death. She fixed her lipstick and hair. Patted her face with a paper towel and clicked out back to the table.

"Sorry, there was a line."

"Salad got cold." Fredrick joked, sending Mona into a giggle fit.

Evie saw him eye her knuckles and moved her hands under the table. She smiled again mechanically, contained herself.

“There’s a new *Friday The 13th* flick out. I want to see that.”

Satisfaction welled when Fredrick’s grin fell before he plastered it right back.

“You...” He twitched when Mona cozied into him. “You read my mind.”

“I heard it’s terrible.” Evie picked up her fork. “Naturally, I have to see it.”

“You two getting along, isn’t this lovely? It could always be like this.” Mona went for her drink. Evie plucked the dessert menu from the side stand.

“Suddenly, I have my appetite back for something sweet.” She browsed. Knuckles swollen. Chipper as can be. “Can I get a slice of apple pie? A la mode. Of course.” Fredrick hated dessert time because Mona fed him bites and reveled in relationship mush. He always thought Evie ate too much despite eating the same as girls around her.

She ignored him, let her fingers brush the torn, fraying edge of her ruined tights. Each spot Billy kissed. Worshiped. Heat pulsed when she saw him again on the other side of the room. Working and pretending she wasn't watching and admiring him. He caught her eyes. Admired her right back, sucking in his bottom lip. Thrilled. Evie tuned back to her mother and Fredrick. Pushing together talking.

As they played some one-sided flirting, Evie stared down at her knuckles again. Puckering rubies soon to discolor.

She wondered how far the red would bleed around her.

And if her loved ones would step away if it pooled too close.

Notes for the Chapter:

We're at a darker part of the story line and the next

chapter will be the heaviest one so far so just warning for that. Thank you so much to everyone who has supported me and loved my characters. All the love is appreciated and felt. I'm also posting the editing version of my old old Loki fic if anyone is interested in that!

Please kudo or chatter with me below if you have time!! xoxo

25. Thank You and Goodnight!

Notes for the Chapter:

Evie and Fredrick have a deadly confrontation that threatens to shake her entire world apart.

Guys. I'm so happy and thankful that this story is being cherished and followed. A lot has changed since I left tumblr and I'm doing real well. This chapter is dark, it deals with very real, hard topics. Topics that have touched my life as well as too many others. It's important that I get things right in telling this story and I hope you all are taking care.

TW: Sexual assault, abuse, threats, manipulation, talk of death/suicide, and major trauma. It's not all explicit, but it occurs and it's not made light of. Please be in the right mindset before reading. I truly love each of you tuning in for this story and Evie. Know that there is always good and always a way out.

“Too cold?”

Evie looked up at Steve in the guestroom doorway. A kind smile crossing as he pushed his hands into his pockets and approached. Night came to a gentle simmer dotted in stars. Blue curled up on Evie's lap while she reclined in the bay window. Contented somehow.

“No, it's fine.” She scratched the cat's ears. “She's growing.”

“She keeps hiding my pens.” He shifted to sit across from her. “Hargrove called a bit ago, he's running late but left work. Wherever that is. Stopped by his place.”

“Best not to bring it up.” Evie peered outside, a beat to watch the trees sway. Seemingly dancing with them. “Do you still have feelings for Nancy?”

“That ship sailed.”

“Not the question.” Evie pressed her mouth at him and Steve shrugged.

“I was shitty to her during our last few fights. Left my girlfriend drunk at some party. Yelled at her the next morning when she was hurting over Barb. I don’t get cool points because I took over some babysitting gig that worked out for me.” Steve crossed his legs and sat back. “Don’t even think Hargrove would have pulled some of that crap.”

“Least you didn’t sleep with your teacher. A man who has now also slept with your mother. To get back with you.” Evie rolled her eyes. “We’re all after school specials, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” Steve laughed, “yeah, we are.”

“He’s not even a good English teacher, too.” Evie burst, covering her lips. “I disagreed with every book opinion he had. We used to have these debates, *argh*. He thought Humbert Humbert was some tragic, deep hero. God, I hope my mother drives him up the wall with her Dolly Parton obsession. And what’s really twisted is I’m so...I’m used to him being back. This short time, it’s like he never left.”

“He’s fucked up.”

“Probably what drew him to me in the first place. Feel like I gave a vampire permission to enter my home.” A grimace crossed. Evie rubbed her temples. “I’m sorry, it’s all I talk about.”

“Your life. The audacity.” Steve shrugged, petting Blue as well. “Talk away, it’s fucked. Thought my parent’s cheating Olympics was pretty screwed up so if it’s any consolation, I feel normal for the first time.”

Evie laughed again. A louder sound.

“That’s why I’m here.” She shifted and Blue chirped, disturbed before she bounded up to go to her water dish. “Thanks for having the freak show over.”

“Ah, I wouldn’t go that far. I like having friends around.” Steve sighed, lashes fluttering too pretty at her. Evie softened at him, legs

curling under herself.

“Did you just refer to Billy as a friend?” Evie cooed at him and Steve frowned for effect, head shaking. “Steve Harrington...”

“Let’s not go wild just yet.”

A tap caught them both followed by another. Harder. Steve pushed the window open at the same time a pebble nailed him in the head.

“Asshole!” He called out. “You saw me opening the damn window.” Evie pushed in next to Steve to see Billy down below with a bag clutched in hand.

“I got trigger happy.” A tired grin flashed. “I stink and I’m using the shower.”

“How about I hose you down there?”

“Yeah, yeah, I dropped some food off with Max at home...you got food in there? I gave her everything.” Billy shifted on his feet.

“Yeah, got some frozen burritos. I’ll stuff a handful in the oven for you.” Steve inched back.

“I’ll get the door, you start food.” She bounded down the steps and yanked the door open. Bare feet padding over grass so she could jump into Billy’s arms as if she hadn’t seen him hours ago. Dropping his bag of fresh clothing, Billy hiked her up for a kiss.

“Mm, what a greeting.” He mused, lips coaxing hers open for more. “I smell like a fryer.”

“I don’t care.” Evie devoured him for saltwater kisses and slid down. “C’mon, food and rest.” She plucked up his bag and grabbed for a hand, tugging Billy inside.

“How’d the rest of the dinner go?”

“My mom sank too many drinks and sang all the way home.”

“Good woman.” He scoffed. “You tell Harrington about the fight?”

“Yeah, he gave me a talking to earlier and an ice pack.” Evie locked the door behind them. “Go shower and eat.”

“As you wish, Angel.” Billy sauntered off with drowsy steps. Evie went back upstairs and crawled into bed after dimming the lights. She hugged the pillow and stayed awake. Minutes ticked on. Knuckles sore and bleating. Pulsing red and purple splotches same as flower petals.

“Hey, Evie, you need anything before I head to my room?” Steve poked his head into the doorway.

“Not staying?” Evie lifted her head. “You’ve slept with us every time I’ve stayed over.”

“Wasn’t sure if it was tradition yet.”

“Yeah, well, I’m damaged and needy so come get in the bed.” Evie stretched on her front.

“Damaged and needy club. Room for three.” Steve remarked, crossing.

“Don’t let me fall asleep until Billy’s here.” She mumbled into the pillow. Evie felt the bed shift as Steve slipped in. “Were you close with any of your family?” She turned her head to spot him. Big brown eyes pulled to focus.

“No,” Steve plopped back with a hand running into dark locks, “didn’t realize I missed it until I was older and it was too late. We just didn’t do family stuff. Never told Tommy this, but he has a great relationship with both his parents. Always made me jealous when I spent time at his place. Family vacations. Big meals. My parents and I just sorta did our own thing. Once I was old enough to use an oven and get an allowance, I was left alone a lot.”

“You’re still good though, at getting close,” Evie paused when he glanced over, seeming to process that.

“Think so?” He earned a nod. Steve extended a hand that Evie took. Both of them shared a smile, tender as can be. The door opened and Billy strode in, rubbing his full stomach.

"I miss another heart-to-heart, kids?"

"Just in time actually, come on in. Water's fine." Evie muffled a sound into her pillow and slipped from Steve. Billy fell into bed. Run ragged and beat.

"I really hate rich people. No offense, Harrington." He squirmed to press into Evie's back. "Might be the six burritos I just stuffed talking."

"No, you're right. We suck." Steve replied flatter. "You can point a finger and laugh when my dad inevitably blows our money and runs away with a younger woman."

"I'm holding you to that."

"Probably why my mom sticks so close to him." Steve continued, arms shifting behind his head. Billy's fingers drew under Evie's tee for the added warmth, tracing little shapes into flesh.

"Your dad is a douche. My mom dragged me to a fancy Christmas party the mayor was having for business owners in town. Bunch of rich people to schmooze." Evie rubbed her nose into the pillow. "Mr. Harrington tried to hand me his coat when he came in as if I was the damn help. And he talked all slow like I didn't speak English. So rude."

Steve snorted, covering his mouth before Evie smacked his arm.

"I didn't know about that, I'm so sorry." He chuckled into his palm, turning to hide it. "I remember that party. Walked in on the mayor feeling up his secretary. Didn't see me but I couldn't unsee them."

"Gross. Mayor Kline is such a slimeball, dickwad, creep." Evie wiggled to get comfortable, peeking down. "Hand." Billy's face burrowed into her hair to mumble.

"Warm 'n you smell good." Muscles shifted as he squeezed her in close until she giggled. Lips peppering Evie's jawline.

"You guys need me for this part?" Steve broke into the moment so Evie wormed away from Billy.

"Harrington, you're free to throw in some moves if Evie's into that." Came the sleazy response.

"Ignore him, he's in a mood." Her head nestled on Steve's shoulder.

"He was right though," he inhaled. Evie chuckled into his shirt.

"Billy used your body wash, so you both smell the same." She stretched back, ignoring the hints. "I like this room. This bed. Feels safe. Do I make you guys feel safe?"

"Why're you so fixated on that, Eves?" Billy shifted to face them so Evie turned back.

"I just don't wanna feel small anymore." She curled back up. "Not sure how to fix that."

Filling her body with pretty and sharp things did not make her sparkle and gleam. Didn't make her razor-sharp against all pain. It only made her want so much more. An unquenchable hunger with an ache that got louder by the day.

"You make us feel safe." Billy decided with genuine grace. "Max, too. Heather. Carol. Even Tommy, I bet. Not like he'll admit it, freckled macho fucker."

Steve snickered quieter behind her.

"He's right." A gruff scoff followed. "Agreeing with Billy feels wrong but it's a sacrifice I'll make for you."

Cheeks lifted and Steve knew Evie had smiled. Billy scooted in to take her bruised hand.

"Is it bad that I think I'm sparing another girl while Fredrick is so wrapped up in me?"

"That girl shouldn't be you either. It shouldn't be anyone." Billy flared a little as he said that. Evie pulled the covers higher.

"I know that." Evie brought her arms around her pillow. Nuzzled it

tight and closed her eyes. Decided she was finished speaking. "Goodnight, boys." Exhales in the dark underscored frogs chirping outside. The sun had set this day. Evie looked to a new and better morning every single time.

She hoped so. She really hoped so.

** **

Ding!

Evie perked from her book and raced to the stove, opening it to inhale.

"Perfect." She plucked the dish out and covered it in foil. Tossing out Mona's careful reheat instructions, Evie packed it into a safe carrier for transport and went out. Crossed to the Hargrove house and balanced it to hit the bell.

There was something grey and sunken about Susan when she answered. Hair piled into a messy bun. Thin sweater hanging off her frame.

"Evie? Hi."

All of Hawkins knew the Hargrove house situation. The TV sounded behind Susan. No doubt Neil was planted in front of it with a bottle. Max picked up housework and was often seen carrying bags full of clinking glasses out to the trash in the evening.

"Hi. My mom made her famous lasagna and wanted me to send a dish over." It was enough for lunch and dinner. Evie beamed and Susan exhaled before her lips rose. Nervous and appreciative. "She made it for a work potluck and naturally made too much. If I eat anymore myself, I'll just burst." Lie.

"Smells good. Come in, I have two other dishes of Mona's." Susan led her through the house. Still sorta stinking under cleaner and recently lit candles.

"Evangeline," Neil flicked to a game and she paused to greet him.

“Hello.” She forced another smile. Neil was slightly scruffier but recently showered in a pressed tee and jeans. Clearly tipsy.

“Are you losing weight?”

“No, sir, thank you.” Meekly, Evie put her head down and hurried after Susan to set the dish down. Max was grunting under the table, scrubbing some gunk from the floor. “Hey.”

“Evie.” Max’s fatigue washed away and she hurried up to hug her. “Is that food?”

“Yeah and I didn’t burn it so small victories for me.” Evie chuckled while Susan beamed and dug two ceramic dishes out. “Thanks, no rush with this one.” The kitchen was more bare than she’d seen it.

“Tell your mother to pop over so I can thank her when she’s not busy with the salon.” Susan smiled. “We appreciate it. Can you stay for a slice?”

“Ah, I have a thing I need to do, but enjoy. I’ll be around later.” Evie kept shifting her feet causing Max to narrow. “How’s the job?”

“The people are very nice. I like the discount and coupons.” Susan only nodded, busying with collecting plates and silverware. “Max and Billy are so much help. Neil’s been great. So great.” She said that last part a little louder. “The people here are just so, so nice. Supportive. Moving to Hawkins was the best thing for us.”

Evie twitched a smile, eyes elsewhere.

“Cozy town. Quiet.” She peered outside and saw a flash of red. “I gotta go, but I’d love to chat some more another time. Bye, Max.”

“Leaving already? We can hang out?” Max tailed after her.

“I have something I need to do, but maybe tonight.”

“Max, leave the older girls alone.” Neil cut in smoothly, turning the volume up. “Too busy to play with little girls.”

Evie wanted to snap but wouldn’t risk Neil’s mood swings.

"I have homework," she lied, "we can hang out later. Promise." Evie squeezed Max's shoulder and left the house in a hurry. Fredrick was parking around back. Shaken, she called to him.

"Stay there. I'll just get my purse." Evie jogged into the house to dig for it under a pile of clean laundry on her bed that needed sorting. The front door opened and smacked shut. "I just said, I'd-"

"No need, we can watch a movie right here. Cozier." Fredrick was shutting the blinds. Breezing around the living room like a ghost. He plucked up a photo of Mona and Evie in New Orleans. Pushed together and grinning with beignets in hand. Steaming and sugary sweet. Happy.

"I'd rather go out in public."

"Evie, I have a feeling you're forgetting yourself. I think it'll still look strange. Us about the town without Mona. We can stay right here and just talk. Really get to know each other again." Fredrick settled his hands into his pockets. Safe and unsuspecting. "Mona wants us to get along. It would be a shame if we didn't. Don't you agree?"

Evie shifted into the wall. Thought to race back to her room and lock the door. Wondered if he'd break it down to get to her. Cool and collected, Fredrick smiled with charm and faced Evie.

"We could go to the movies and get ice cream." She tried. "We used to talk about doing that."

"And we will." He agreed. "One day. I already told your mother I had a school matter to handle and we'd reschedule the movie. She doesn't know I'm here." Fredrick took three long strides to her. Watched Evie shift back into the opposite wall. Her purse dropped off her shoulder. Caught, he stood over her. Hands lifting. Hovering. "Are you really this afraid of me? It hurts me, you feeling that way."

Brown eyes tilted anywhere else. Back onto the photograph where she was smiling with her mother. Feeling safe and secure in the frame.

"What would be the worst thing I could ever do to you?" Fredrick stole Evie's stiff hand and pulled it into both of his. A number of things blared in her brain but she only shuddered, finally looking at him. Deep into his eyes that used to mesmerize her. "Don't worry." He cooed. "You can put all those fears behind you."

Lips touched her bruised knuckles before he blew cool air into the heated flesh. Evie gave this scratching sound low in her throat. Pressed deep into the wall. Wishing to melt into them and haunt the house. As if a part of her already wasn't haunting these grounds. Sleeping and waking and walking with time lost in between. A Cherry Lane specter.

"I would never do it." Fredrick rubbed her shoulders. "I just want her back. My Evie. I want to look at her and hold her again."

"Fredrick," Evie choked out, "please."

"Yes, yes, that's exactly it." He tremored and pressed their foreheads together. Brought her hand back up and kissed the fingertips. Her entire core trembled in fear. "We are a team. You need me."

Evie wiggled out from his shadow and slid aside, holding herself.

"I brought you something to wear for me. Something like what you used to wear. I just want to see you again. My sweet Evie. Hold you close." Fredrick stalked slowly after her with intent eyes. Evie slipped further away, edging toward her room. "Just you and me. I need to make sure you're not dead."

"I have things to do later. People who will come here if I'm not on time."

"This won't take the whole day. Just a few hours. Mona's busy, she won't come home. I haven't touched her, Evie. Not all week. That can change depending on how these hours go." Fredrick didn't bat an eyelash, inching toward her. Creeping like the boogeyman. About to yank her by the ankles under the bed.

"Stop. I don't want to-"

"I just want to look at you!" He snapped and Evie cringed to cower into the wall. Fredrick tore up a canvas bag from the couch and tossed it at her. "Put it on." That came out calmer.

Evie clutched the bag protectively in response.

"Just one thing, Evie. It's the least you can do." He inhaled and let it out sharper. Tempering. "Don't make more trouble for your mother. More than you already have I should say."

"Can we just get ice cream together," Evie wobbled there, "in the lights? Please."

"I spent money on you."

"Okay...okay, just..." Evie looked around for escape and opened the bag. Layers of silky chiffon and satin spilled into her fingers. A creamy nightgown with off the shoulder frills. Something you'd wear in a dream. Something a babydoll would wear tucked safe in her bed. Something a longing ghost would dance about the grounds in. Sleeping and waking and walking. Brown eyes shut. "Can we just talk first?" She dropped the bag and came to him.

"Put it on and we'll talk." He ushered Evie to the bathroom. "Don't shut this. Just change."

Evie did as she was told. Cheeks bloomed with sour cherries. Fabric ghosted the floor and swayed loose around her body. A lady in white. She unclasped Billy's ring and hung it behind the door. Evie could see the outline of her curves through the layers and brought hair over her shoulders. Hugging herself, she shuffled out and stared at the floor.

"This is how I pictured you on our wedding night." Fredrick gave this manic grin and gasped, seizing her arms. "So beautiful... Just looking. Stop squirming. Your mother worried about you during dinner. I told her you're just adjusting. That you're okay."

"But..." Evie brought her eyes up, grasping Fredrick's wrists. "But I'm not okay."

"Go into your mother's room and lie down. I just want to hold you." He ignored that.

"I'm...I'm on my period. I'll bleed on it." Evie darted to find a lie. "I don't want to bleed on this. It's so...so pretty. You spent money on me." She sniffled and flashed her teeth.

"Just press your legs closed. Hold it. It's fine." Fredrick pulled her and Evie flared, shoving off him.

"Are you really almost forty and you don't know how a fucking period works, you stupid piece of shit!" She seethed, fists shaking about. Unexplained why such a thing in a grown man could make her so furious. Of all things. This obviousness to women who bled because they had no choice.

Fredrick lashed forth, hugged her close.

"So, so defensive. You must be exhausted." He dragged her into her mother's perfumed room. Evie yelped as she hit the mattress and balled up. Shrouds of white spilling like liquid pearls over her skin and over the bed. Only the outline of her blue underwear showing color on her frame.

Fredrick hovered there over her and Evie pushed up into the pillows. Holding her knees. She laughed a soft cruel sound at him. Watched him pause there at the foot of the bed.

"It's sad. You know," she wiped her nose, "you really could have anyone. You're beautiful. Put together. Educated. You could walk into a bar and have women trip over themselves to please you. To see you smile and always make you happy." Curls shook out and she shrugged at him. "So, why?"

"Why?" Slowly, he came down to sit at the edge of the bed. Empty space between them that seemed to grow wider.

"Why me?" Evie batted her lashes. "If I'm so needy and small and inexperienced to you. Why bother? I'm just the Cherry Lane girl who sat in the corner of your class with a stupid crush. You could have forgotten I existed. Easily. Moved on like you never knew me and fallen in love with someone else. Gone back to your wife."

His palm extended flat on the bed.

“Fredrick,” Evie shifted and took his hand, “you can still do that, you know? Leave and keep living just fine. Don’t we deserve better than this? That Evie you thought you had was not real. I wanted you to love me as bad as I loved you and it was...it was not good. It wasn’t real. You made yourself into something I might love, too. We shouldn’t have done that to each other.”

“I did go back to my wife. I tried.” He admitted, eyes flickering. A sobered chuckle. Dry. “She couldn’t stand the sight of me, Evie. I brought her flowers and begged and she just...she just ran. And I chased her, but she just wouldn’t quit. Kept denying me. Kept running. I just wanted her to stop running and she...”

Absolutely haunted, he turned to Evie as if she were the only star in the sky.

“It wasn’t my fault,” he sounded small, “she wasn’t looking where she was going. She was afraid of me too.”

Evie heard a distant crash. The rolling and crunching of metal.

“You don’t think it was my fault. Do you, Evie?” He squeezed her hand. Watched her stare back wide and agape.

“N-No.” A quiver. A chill. A flash. “No, you’re just...hurting.”

“That’s right.” He nodded until she matched it to agree.

“So, you came back. You were so scared that I told someone, how do you know I won’t just go to Chief Hopper?” Evie swallowed and felt his thumb rub a circle into her knuckles, pressing the bruises until pain crossed her face. Pain she withheld and contained. Pushed back down.

“That’s why.” He let up. “You worry too much about your image, Evangeline. About every little eye on you. Always having to be so assured. So strong. You know the world doesn’t love you and you just pretend you’re fine with that. So, no, I don’t think you’re going to risk shattering everything you built by spinning a girlish fantasy for the police.”

She gulped, not letting go. Trembling in his grip. Exposed like a

thousand nerves screaming at being salted and plucked from bone.

“Look at you, Evie, and look at me.” He continued, still tender. “Girls like you don’t get to play princess to my prince charming. All you have are dreams. And that girl you gave me, she was real for both of us. Real enough. You’re happy to play until nothing else exists for a few pats on the head.”

“Is that why you picked me?” Evie uttered there. Hurting too deep to touch. “Cause you’d get away with it.”

“No,” Fredrick moved too quick, cupping her cheeks so she’d look deeper, “never. I picked you cause you’re the end for me.”

“Fredrick.” Evie crumbled and tried to hold it together. “I don’t have anything else for you. You took it all. I can’t...I can’t...”

“My father left me too, you know. Hung himself in front of me when I was just a boy from the tree I used to swing on. Mother was never the same. Hated me. He had that same look in his eye that my wife did before she ran in front of that truck. People think they can just...leave.” His tone hitched lower, nails on a chalkboard while he held Evie steady. “They build a pain into you that you can’t fill with anything. Don’t they? They leave you tumbling aimlessly into a pit and you know the bottom can’t be reached.”

“You built pain into me too,” Evie’s elbows came up to pry his grip off, “you made me into someone who could be hurt again and again. Because your life was so sad, you have to push everyone else into the same pit. You want to dress me up like a baby and have me still sit at your feet as a woman?” She pushed up, wobbling to rage at him in his billow of smoke. “You’re the one with the fantasy! Not me! You!”

“I’ve tried with you, Evie!” He ripped to his feet. “We almost got there. You were almost perfect. Don’t pretend like you didn’t miss me and miss what we had. Even for a moment.”

“I did miss you, Fredrick! I missed how you made me feel. I missed that I could open up to you and that you listened and that you took parts of me seriously. I missed laughing with you and how I felt my world wasn’t ending! But, it was still fucked. It was still wrong. I

missed the fake you that you became for me. Of course you'll never be happy settling with some other Midwestern girl who makes you drinks and licks your wounds. We both made a fantasy and you can't compete with that." Evie spread her arms out, chiffon flying angrily. A rabid swan flapping to descend upon him.

"You don't believe that." He'd hissed, fists clenching together.

"Nothing I say is gonna get through to you. You're stuck in your perfect little world where I'm your little Lolita forever. Where you see me in every other girl. I'm it!" Evie sagged. "I already outgrew you, Fredrick, I can't undo that. I'm not sorry I did, but I am sorry that you can't let go of whatever it is you still see in me. I do look for my dad in everyone and I'm afraid of what'll happen when I actually find him again. What'll bubble up with him." Evie stepped toward him. "Is that the hole you really want to fill? Want me to be helpless and play with dolls and suck my thumb, twirling my curls and calling you *fucking* daddy?"

"That's enough." Fredrick wiped his eyes. "That's enough, Evie."

"No, it's not." She lashed her hands at him and missed. "Nothing is ever enough. Not for good old, cool guy Mr. B!" Fingers plucked up her miles of flowing skirts to sway back and forth. "C'mon, daddy, we could play house. I'll make you cookies and you can spank me when I burn them. Murder me! Just murder me, daddy!"

Evie pouted. Stomped her feet. Posed with her curls like a little darling.

"I'm a helpless baby girl. I want my fucking bear, daddy! I want to wear red high heels and eat chocolates from your hands and curl up in your lap because you're all I need. Kiss me better, daddy. You think anyone else will do what I do? No way, baby, I'm it! So, let's play the day away!"

"I told you, stop it!" Fredrick tore her forward by the wrists. "Why can't you just be normal?" He shook her like a ragdoll, cupping the back of her head so she'd fume in his direction. Tenderly, Evie took his jaw in her hand and drew close to whisper.

“You’re abnormal.”

“I want to kill myself, you know that?” He steadied her there. “When I think about not being with you, I want to die. I love you. That’s love. I’d die for you. You ungrateful little shit. Why don’t you tell me who will love you if I don’t, Evie?” Fredrick brought her in to hug him when she made this whimpering sound. “Humor me, who’s going to love you then? Huh?”

Evie clung to him. Dug her nails into his shoulders. The whimper turned into dry amusement. Into fury. Into wings that could carry her for one fleeting moment.

“Me.” Evie reeled back and hocked a nasty wad of spit into his face like she’d seen Billy and Tommy cast at the ground. Fredrick let her go, disgusted as he stumbled. Feet tripped to leap around him, veering to race toward the front door. No shoes in nothing but a billowy nightie and underwear.

A pile of weight plowed into her. Body tipping to crash into the couch. Hands slapped around her throat when her mouth hiked open to shriek.

“I’ll crush your precious vocal cords if you scream.” Fredrick put his weight on her legs. Evie went rigid there. Frozen. “Good.” Violent breaths pushed in and out of his mouth, canines baring before he clamped her wrists down.

Rain began to sprinkle and beat the window above them. She was so close to touching it.

“Little fighter.” He wiped his cheek again, thrilled at her. Loving this game. “I’ve waited, Evie. I have.” Fingers unbuttoned his shirt. “I can’t wait for you. I need you so bad. My girl. My Evangeline. My everything. It’s all for you. I’ll bring you back myself.”

“Get off.” She pushed up at his chest.

“You do this, you drive men insane. I can’t hold it back. You’re okay. I love you.” His outer shirt hit the floor and Evie saw it finally. Two crescent-shaped scars on his inner bicep. Narrowing, she

brushed her fingers over the bumpy, healed skin. Rain pounding harder. "I love you, Evie, this is love. This is okay."

"You grabbed Max." She sank a gasp low in her ribs. "You were there for me that night and you saw her. It was my fault... Why?" Brown eyes went steady on him. She stopped squirming and fighting it to remember what Max said. "You can't control it? So easy to blame the kid."

"I just...I can't help it. You're like a drug, Evie." Fredrick laid against her, kissing Evie's cheeks while she puffed at him. Craning to evade.

"You're never gonna stop are you and if it's not me, it's gonna be another girl. My mother. Carol. Max." And she had to save them. She had the pit built in for the hurt.

"What are you talking about?" Fredrick heaved at her, adjusting while she fell limp. "It's okay. This is okay." He kept saying that. "This is love."

Evie craned back so she couldn't see him because the words sounded so horrible. So strange and disjointed and not real while he kept putting those same syllables together. As if repetition would make them both believe it.

A breath leapt when the white shroud came over her head. Fredrick moved to bunch it down so he could see her expression. His words and murmurs of love became a distant ringing. Evie gave a whimper and felt the stab of everything she'd swallowed inside her parts prickling and bubbling. Crystallizing. Making her into something new and beautiful. Something twisted too.

Stabbing a needle over and over and over again into a soft tuft of felt until it was a connection of prettier parts. Sweat trickled down her hairline. Curls splayed and frizzing over. Fredrick wheezing somewhere in space. Telling her about love. Building a bigger pit inside her to fill. Maybe vast enough for him to crawl into and hide.

Evie remembered the cold and the flashes again. Her father pulling the bear from her hands to lead her away. The flashes getting closer,

washing over her the same as a sprinkle of rain. Fredrick gasped above her and thunder boomed to shatter her world. Pieces that would be delicacies she could indulge in.

Years ago, she was halfway into that attic before a car pulled up. Her father plucked her from the steps. Brought her feet to touch the floor again. Mona came home. Evie never went up there with him. They ate dinner and her father left in the morning. Another day. Another sale to be made. Her poor bear lost somewhere.

The flashing wasn't for her.

"Be polite, Evie." Fredrick pecked her mouth, sighed and nudged into her temple. "Tell me you love me."

Quietly, she did. Words that would save other frightened girls so she hoped.

"We're leaving Hawkins together. Like we always planned. Late May, we'll set a date when your mother's wrapped up in her shop. You'll let the Hargrove boy down easily, of course."

She panned to focus on him. The little baby voice slipped out.

"Sounds good. A fresh start could be so nice. If I promise we'll run away, will you leave my mom? Leave all the other young girls alone?" Evie winced as he got up. Heard his belt clicking.

"I have you, I don't need anyone else. Just be sweet. We'll plan our forever." Fredrick continued in his dreams and Evie turned on her side to push the nightie down. Catching his breath, he swept his blond hair back and sat down. One palm came to rest on her hip, patting in a consoling motion. "You feel it now, don't you? Finally, I have you back. You understand how much I love you."

Evie sniffled. Eyes open at nothing. She took Fredrick's hands and slipped to unclasp one of his cheap cufflinks.

"If I let you put me back together, will that be enough?"

He heaved with tears, gasping before he swept down to hold her tight.

“Oh, Evie.” He cooed. “You’re perfect.”

“I know.” She wobbled to her feet. Felt for the wall to go. “I understand now. We’ll talk...but we have to be careful. I don’t want to hurt my mother. Not too much.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Fredrick rubbed the back of his neck. “I trust you’ll take care of things. You’re mine.”

“My mother likes begonias. Bring her some to celebrate the start of the new salon. It’ll make her smile. You should go now. We’ll talk about time, Fredrick.” Fingertips trailed down the hallway. He crossed to her, spinning Evie around for true love’s kiss. Tasting of rust and cherry cough syrup. Hot and dripping down her dry throat. Filling a drunk stomach.

“I’ll keep my distance to keep us safe.” Fredrick jerked her hand to touch his heart. “Anything that happens, this belongs to you. Take care of me, Evie. You saved me.”

A tear rolled down her hot cheek.

“You saved me.”

Fredrick tucked his shirt back in and fixed himself on the way to the back. A door smacked shut and Evie collapsed in a sea of white. Bowing low to the floor, her fingers scraped across the wood. Contorting.

Outside, Fredrick crossed to his car and spotted a flash of red hair. Max dumped the trash out around back. She turned and jumped at him standing there. Charm tugged his lips before he gave a friendly point.

“You’re the Hargrove girl, right?” He didn’t shy from the rain. Rolling down his face and clothing. “Max.”

She stared at him and turned to go inside as her mother called.

Bowers got into his shiny death mobile, speeding away from the Fenny house and the girl he left inside.

Evie brought the cufflink to her lips and it went down to block a scream. She curled up there in her flowing gown. Looking like a princess. Like the sweetest thing atop of cake nestled in sugary buttercream. Dripping down her thighs.

Wide eyed and shaking and not there. Evie climbed up and saw a crack of light from the attic. A glimmer in space she tried to hold. A tether to this world that did not love her. Fingers pulled a string down so the ladder would sink low. She climbed toward the light. Toward the flashes that blinded her. Toward the rain and cold.

The hard droplets pounded. Made a spring song up of fallen stars. Evie dirtied her nightie in the grime and dust. Pushing boxes over. No sign of anything her father left behind. No clothing. Not even a loose tie or sock. Nothing from his office. Except a bulk buried in the corner. He used to keep it hidden in his office closet. Told Mona his antique gun collection was neatly packed inside.

Locked away from their little daughter to keep her safe.

Evie pulled a blanket from the green chest. Locked tight.

Why would her father bring all his cheap ties and leave this?

Far and up away, Evie cut the lock and pushed it open. Felt around for a cold barrel and squinted. Nothing. Old flannel blankets folded and piled up. She swept them aside in her pursuit, leaning in to pull out a scruff of fuzz.

That old lost bear Jack had gotten for her. Missing one glassy eye. Eyes welling, she hugged it so close and let a few acidic tears pour. Evie kept searching and touched the line of a book. A photo album. Polaroid corners sticking out. Slowly, she opened it.

The rain beat louder until it was one long screech. A long bow casting slow and steady across vibrating strings. Yes, Evie saved other girls today. Other kids terrified of monsters who smiled sweet. She saved them.

Because there was a time long ago that she didn't. That she was the girl who was saved. Endless cycles that built pain and spread it.

Evie slapped it shut. Shoving everything back. Covering the wretched lockbox that had her trapped all these years. Along with too many others. Connected by thin red strings bound from heart to heart. Soul to soul. Womb to tomb.

Leaving her beloved ratty bear behind, Evie pushed the window open. Wanted to touch the sky. That beating of rain sounded like a full audience of cheers. Chanting her name. Bare feet scraped against a damp roof. Soaked to the bone immediately, she pushed up. Tearing her nightie on the way to greet her fans. To feel their love illuminate.

“Evangeline! Evangeline! Evangeline!”

Evie pushed her wet curls aside as they stuck to her face. Wobbling up atop the roof to cross. Sunlight and rain streaming down to illuminate her utterly. The chanting rolled on. She was a thing of beauty and talent and wonder. She'd save them all too.

Kiss me.

Thrill Me.

Hold me.

Love me.

Thank you and goodnight!

And they'd cheer. They'd sing her songs and beg for an encore.

Neon demons echoing the distant calls. Evie tossed her arms out. Rain dripping. Not cleansing her. Not enough. She'd been such a dirty, disgusting girl. Not fighting it like she promised Carol. But she'd save them all. And her fans would rally a great cry all for her. Because they loved her so much. Because she saved them too.

She relished the adoration. At the highest edge of the roof. Tipping. Saw hands outstretched to touch her. Strange how everyone and no one wanted to touch her. Just once.

Thank you and goodnight!

At the same time, Neil Hargrove's eyes turned to spot a ghost. A woman in white. Eyes blurring the figure outside. Same ghost that seemed to follow him for too many years. He sank a gulp of beer that didn't take the specter away. That didn't take his dead wife away. Rubbed his eyes before it seemed clear.

"What in the hell?" He pushed up, a hand scratched at his stubble. Neil came to the window. And then it clicked. "Is that the Fenny girl?"

She swayed and spun. Arms out. Practically nude because the nightgown was torn and dirty at the bottom from being dragged. Sopping and clinging to her body like paint. Lips moving to sing a song for her fans below. Neil skidded outside in his socks, jeans already covered in muck. Splashing steps.

"Evangeline!" He called from his lawn, barely able to make out the words under the storm. "Evangeline!"

"Oh, but anyone who knows what love is..." Evie sighed and paused to spot him. Seeming to look through him. Her bare foot tipped toward the edge.

"Evangeline!" Neil waved his hand and Susan clattered onto the porch behind him.

"Neil, what's going on?" She followed his horrified eyes in time to see a cloud of white flash. A cry and the sound of wet impact.

Her husband rushed to where Evie landed in the mud and grass. Gasping tiny puffs because her lungs stopped functioning from the shock of it. Arms and legs spread while her fingers shifted to feel the blades of wet green. Unable to process this world that let her go. That didn't try to catch her because it didn't love her.

"Oh, my god." Susan skidded around the corner to see Neil carefully leaning over Evie. A white slinky fabric twisted around her curves. Exposing. "Evie!" She cried at the same time Max bumped into her from behind.

Neil had this look on his face she'd seen one other time. This

haunted scar puckering his expression after his wife's body had been found. Something that twisted all Vets. He was hovering over Evie, hands flat on either side. Saying something she couldn't make out.

Susan realized Max was twisting in her arms. Yelling and clawing to get to her friend the same way a mad cat would. Evie's eyes kept opening and closing. Blood dripped from her nose and lip. Limbs twitching as she trembled violently from either pain or the cold. Or both.

"Susan, take Maxine inside and call 911. Call Ramona's salon. Now. Bring me a coat!" Neil barked at her. Eyes wide in terror as if a bomb had gone off in his face. Peeling flesh from bone. Melting eyes from their sockets. Bones cracking from the marrow to blacken.

"Evie!" Max was dragged by her mother.

"Max, go to your room. It'll be okay. We'll take care of Evie." She soothed as they went. Neil craned to watch Evie breathe, rain dripping down his face when he peered up at where she fell from. Not too long a fall with their house being one story plus an attic.

Evie wheezed, glossy eyes fluttering as she sputtered there. Brow knit together. Still looking beyond him at something else. Her lips parted as she tried to form words.

"Thank you..." She reveled there, dreaming. "And goodnight."

"Don't move. Don't move your neck." Neil lifted one hand and realized it was quivering. She looked like a babydoll his wife had from when she was little. They were going to give it to their baby, but they got Billy and Neil refused to give his son a babydoll. Juliet wept about that and he'd rolled his eyes at the time.

"Th-Thank you and goodnight." Evie rasped again, exhaling deeper. Chest hiking and falling sporadically. Her plump heart of a face all painted blush. Long clumpy lashes. Dark locks framing her head like a halo. Neil moved a sticky, wet curl from her temple. Crepe thin dainty fabric pooled around curves.

He jumped when an aimless hand lifted to feel around. Fingers all

clammy when they touched his bare wrist.

“Dad.” She welled up, gazing beyond him. Evie made a croaking sound and Neil let her take his hand to squeeze. Shock still hadn’t worn off, saving her some pain. “You. It was you. You did this. All of this. It was me or them. Me or them. Me... Me.”

“Evie, stay still.” Neil perked as Susan jogged back out with a big winter coat. They covered Evie’s front. “Don’t move her!” He’d snapped at Susan’s tearful hovering. She gingerly touched Evie’s head when the girl got less responsive. Floating there.

“Evie, honey. An ambulance is coming. I left a message with your mother’s salon. Max is by the phone. She’s gonna keep trying.” A snuffle. Susan eyed Evie’s hand curls into Neil’s. A strange sight that he hadn’t shaken her off. He seemed both alert and gone. Facing a phantom that had haunted him. “God, was she up on the roof in this?”

They tried to shield her from the rain washing blood off her face in pink streaks. Sirens pulled in the distance so Neil blinked and pried Evie’s steel fingers from his skin. Settling her hand in Susan’s.

“Stay here,” he muttered, “I’ll wave them over. Don’t let her move her neck.”

Evie’s cracked eyes shifted either direction. She waited to sink into filth as Susan hushed and cooed at her.

“I got you, honey. You’re okay. You’re all right. I’m here.” Knuckles shifted Evie’s cheeks. She remembered the falling, reaching for the rays of sun that wove her into a silken cocoon to sleep so her wings could unfurl.

“Is this love?” Evie blinked, rain falling over the swell of her lips. Bones chattering. “It hurts.”

“Honey, just breathe. Squeeze my hand. They’re coming now.” Susan saw Evie’s eyes roll. “Evie? Evie!”

From the window, Max pressed her nose into the glass to get a good look. A gurney rolling the first girl who was kind to her in

Hawkins, Indiana away. Evie's body and neck braced until the impending x-rays that would expose the growing gemstones crystallizing inside her to the light of the sun.

When Neil and Susan were both distracted, Max went to a phonebook for the name of a restaurant she'd seen embroidered into an apron when Billy did his laundry once. He'd tried to hide it under his jeans. Snapped at her for peeking. A peppy retail voice greeted her and Max cut in, gripping the phone with both hands.

"Hi, I'm looking for my brother. Billy Hargrove. He works there." Max peered outside and felt the red siren lights whirling upon her face. Nosy neighbors peering out to see the drama across the street. "It's, uh, family emergency."

"Hold." Five seconds counted before the ambulance was speeding away. Neil froze as Susan pushed herself into his arms. Sobbing on the sidewalk. Too tipsy to push her off or run. Couldn't remember the last time she'd come into his arms seeking warmth. Maybe she had no choice.

"Max." Billy's oblivious, terse tone sliced forth. "What the hell are you doing calling me at work? How'd you get this number?"

She sniffled.

"Max, what's going on? Talk." He snapped that time. Maxine blinked and remembered the man leaving Evie's house. Looked dashing like the heroes in her comics.

"It's Evie."

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter was a hard one for me. Probably the hardest of anything I've written. Definitely high on that list. Please do not send me hate or try to bring me down for a hard chapter. I know many of my stories deal in harsh/trauma themes, but hope is always important to me at the end of bad days. The love Evie has gotten has been so touching. I notice

each and every one of you who have taken time to bookmark, kudo, or comment. I'm so humbled by it so thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Please feel free to open up and chat with me below. I'd really love to hear from you guys, it keeps me going. The next chapters will be sorta rough, but much easier than this one. Thank you so much. xoxo

26. She's So Lucky, She's a Star

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all!! Sorry I've been so slow with my updates but I've been working super hard on this story and I want it to be great for you guys! I really appreciate all the love for me and for Evie.

TW: Hospitals, talk of pica, trauma, past sexual abuse, and something close to self harm that goes horribly wrong.

We're closing in on the end of this arc. Evie wakes up in the hospital and big truths come to light.

A beat plucked and pounded. Evie lifted her head and saw the sky there. Crystal clear summer blue. Bright rays warming her cheeks. She felt her feet move along a sidewalk. Steam rising from sewer grates in a graceful billow. The beat moved her along until she was dancing. Fire hydrants burst to rain down, casting technicolor rainbows into the sunlight.

Free like her favorite Cyndi Lauper video, Evie let herself go. Red skirts whirled out as she followed her rhythm with that beat. Colorful city streets. Evie twirled. Kicked and splashed through puddles. Plastered smiling faces joined her. She plucked up her tulle skirts and laughed. Curls bounced as she bounded along, arms out to spin again and the sun snuffed.

A slower beat reeled forth and she was standing upon a stage. The velvet lounge she sang at. Blue stage lights washed her expression and Evie came down to the mic Iris was setting up for her.

“Sing, baby.”

An audience of smoke and silhouettes looked upon her there like she was a star. Twinkly. Magnificent. Dying.

Iris smiled and floated off stage. Music piled around that beat that was following her. Sultry. Evie gave this inhale to find her first note,

head tilting back to roll while she felt the swell of sound.

The lights unfurled again as she looked back. Dizzying colors bloomed. The stage became a set. Lacquer steps beneath her. Monochromatic in reds and blush tones. Cameras lined at the ready to film. Music prickled again to vibrate this opulent world. Handsome princes in tuxedos with matching smiles moved around her in sync.

Evie, dripping and decorated in diamonds, moved with them. Flirting as she was caressed. Her ultimate Madonna fantasy. Coveted and graceful. Manic, she grinned brighter with them. Every choreographed move calculated to the letter. They carried her around, danced about her playfully.

Minx. Nymph. Sweet Evie. One lucky star.

She beckoned and they followed down to the main floor. Plucking her up so Evie could glide. Petals totally opened. Beginning to fall and tumble. The boy next to her turned, flashing the same mechanical grin.

“Billy?” Evie blinked several times. Music skidded, scratching the record before it picked up without error. She put her hand in Billy’s on cue. Steps hitting all their marks.

Evie wondered what Marilyn Monroe was thinking in her last moments. Slipping away and numbed in those cool sheets. Maybe knowing the world treated her as a brainless product and not a heart and soul with talent you could never hope to package and sell. Just meaningless lights on a screen to be processed. She was real and the world can't handle real. We auction off our pretty parts in meager portions and stomach a pain in that we could never hope to portray.

Packaged and processed and recycled back again and again for beings who pull a stupid face as if they're listening. Was there hope in the end? If the end at least saved them being chewed up and spit out one more time. If a memory could ever do a magnificent soul justice. Evie wondered what all these starlets were left with in the end and if that end was the best they could hope for. If the legacy was enough. If time allowed them enough to actually live. To do everything they wished. Time enough to feel alive and real and genuine.

The world laments, "*she had so much to give,*" as if they had a right to her at all.

Singing, slinking silky starlet. Pure obscene opulence. Heels clicking. Flash photography. Picture perfect photo finish.

Billy spun her around. Dipped her low in one motion. Pain exploded up Evie's spine. She yanked up to gasp and felt hands holding her down. Iron vices that kept her stiff as a board. That beeping rhythm picked up and Evie wheezed. Waking back into that sea of white.

Starlets screaming and dying behind her eyes. Dreams in ashes.

"Evie, baby?" Mona Fenny, clutching a tissue, reeled over the hospital bed. Makeup ruined from being wiped away. Evie's dry mouth shuddered open to make a sound that scratched. Pain bubbled up like fire in her bones. Her neck strapped into a brace, unable to turn. Stiff and sore, Evie tried to blindly reach up for her mother.

"I'm here. Mama's here. Try not to move, they haven't gotten your x-rays back yet." Mona kissed Evie's feverish head. "Oh, you're so warm. My baby. My poor baby. What were you doing up there? I don't understand, Evie. I don't understand it."

Evie felt the memories flood back with the pain. Whimpering.

"I thought...my wings would carry me."

"What?" Mona puffed, clutching her hand. A man in a lab coat hurried in to check her vitals. Evie moaned softer, hooked to machines and suffocating.

"I know, hon, this'll take some of the pain. We need to get that fever down. Already better than when you came in." An old man with a grey trimmed beard crinkled to smile at her. Cold fingers touched her wrist. "I'm Dr. Simcox. Evie, are you with us?"

She couldn't have been further away if she tried.

"Yes."

“Ms. Fenny.” The doc looked up. “Her x-rays were delayed but they’re coming. I apologize for the wait. You’ll want to inform her group. That wily mullet boy out there has been trying to sneak in and following my nurses with questions. They can come in. Only a few of them. No excitement.”

Billy. Evie twitched some amusement. Mona kissed Evie’s hand in promise and clicked out. Her doctor sighed like this was all so unfortunate. Poor, sweet Evangeline. Poor girl. Poor thing. But, she was lucky. Lucky to be here and alive. So very lucky. Evie’s eyes flicked around.

“What are you doing here, honey?” He fixed her blanket and pressed the cool stethoscope to her chest. Evie went stiff upon the skin contact. Remembered Fredrick’s hands and the sheer gown flying up to settle over her face. Brushing softly along supple cheeks. The motion still seemed so violent. “You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets.”

“Obviously, doctor, you’ve never been a teenage girl.” Evie pulled to meet his eyes before he sighed again to nod, pausing to take down notes. “I fell. I wasn’t trying to...”

No further judgment came from the old man. He checked the clunky machines and her drip, moving aside when a flash of gold skidded in. Billy, face paled, swept to Evie’s bed and curled his fingers over the metal bars.

Guilt welled upon seeing his beautiful eyes there.

“Angel,” he stole her hand when she felt out for him, “hey, you. Hey, you kept me waiting too long.” Billy gasped upon feeling her. Seeing her moving and alert. Not like his mother in that bathtub.

“Hey, yourself. Girl needs her beauty sleep.” Evie had his arm clutched to her chest. Mona guided a tearful Heather in.

“Oh, Evie...” Heather flocked to the opposite side as Dr. Simcox pulled Mona to the corner, whispering as she held herself. “Oh, my god.”

“Meds are kicking in. It’s helping, don’t cry, Heath. Please.” Evie cupped her friend’s pretty face while her pink lips wobbled. “How long have I been here?”

“Maybe two hours. Thought you’d sleep longer. Billy’s dad and stepmom saw you... they said you....” Heather frowned. “Well, they followed the ambulance here and waited for Mona. They left to watch Max, Carol’s calling their house now. Max phoned around to us when it happened. Care, Steve, and Tommy are still in the waiting room for you. The docs didn’t want you crowded yet.”

She and Billy both were pampering Evie in quiet affection. Patting her tangled hair and kissing her hands.

“Doctor,” a nurse urged out of the blue, eyes pointed on Evie, “the scans are done. We need you and Ms. Fenny. Now. There’s something you need to see.”

Evie blanched. Tried to pretend she hadn’t heard that. This was fine. She was fine. She was in control. Such a lucky girl.

“When can I go home?” She squirmed, but the doctor was gone with her mother.

“Psst.” A freckled face popped around the corner. “Coast clear?”

“They just left,” Heather waved the rest of her friends in. Carol sped to push in next to Billy.

“Jesus, Fen, you-”

“I know I look like shit, Care.” Evie swallowed. “Is there water?”

“On it.” Steve turned to the sink.

“Billy’s still looking at you as if you invented Vaseline and tissues, kid, don’t worry.” Tommy cracked to lighten the mood and Carol shoved him. Billy made an annoyed grunt because he had the worst and best taste in friends. Crowding in to look after each other. Evie’s lip twitched.

“Shut up, Tommy,” Carol let him slip an arm around her.

“Evie,” Billy said at last with intent eyes, “what happened?”

“I fell.”

“Yeah, but there was a storm and you were on the roof. Susan said you had no shoes. A nightgown. They had to cut it off you I guess. Max said Bowers left your place and Mona wasn't with him. What happened?” He eased calmer, chest falling. Steve wiggled into the group and offered Evie a straw so she drank cool water. Heart pounding.

“It was an accident.” Evie looked away. Not wanting to talk about it. Wishing she was in the downpour again because filth crawled over her nerves. Billy looked at her in disbelief but decided he'd push it later. “Is...Is Fredrick...?”

“Heard Mona calling him. Left a message at his place.” Steve nodded, rubbing Heather's back before he gave Evie's arm a pat. “We're sticking around. As long as we need to. We'll take shifts.”

“I want to go home, did they say...?” Evie rubbed her stomach and heard it curdle. “I can rest at home.”

“We haven't...” Heather paused when Mona appeared in the doorway. Face ashen. None of the zing and pep she usually had. Behind her, doctors were holding Evie's scans to the light. Talking quickly under their breath.

“I'm sorry, we have to clear the room.” Two nurses flocked to the bed, pushing teens aside. They started fussing with wires, shifting things around for transport.

“What's going on?” Evie tried to sit up and got pushed gently back down. “Mom? Mom!”

“Hey, where's she going?” Billy shoved back in to grasp Evie's hand because she was reaching for him.

“Billy! I'm fine. I feel fine. I want to go home.” Evie puffed, struggling to hold Billy. “I'm fine!”

“She needs to go to surgery right now.” One nurse undid the lock

on the wheels.

“Mom, what’s going on!” Evie begged, Billy slipping away because Tommy and Steve pulled him back. Her friends gathered in the corner, not understanding. Mona just stared. Unreadable. Crestfallen.

“Mama!”

“Evie, baby, you’re going to be okay. Let them help you. I’m here. Mama’s right here!” Mona followed behind as they wheeled her out. Lights shifting down the stretch of hallway. Evie struggled and fussed.

“I’m fine!” She kept heaving. “Billy!”

He’d chased her and stopped, catching a glimpse at the scans of Evie’s spine and torso lined up. Shadowy silhouettes littered low in the image. Odd little shapes like the trinkets Evie kept on her shelves. Like the pushpins hidden behind her bathroom mirror. Inside her. In her stomach and intestines. Moving through her parts.

“What...What are those?” He got close and they shut the light off, taking them down. Ignoring him because he wasn’t family. “Hey, what the fuck are those?”

“Son, please take the party to the waiting room while we speak to the mother,” Dr. Simcox advised and Billy resisted lifting his fist because Heather was tugging at him.

“C’mon. We gotta go, Billy. We’ll wait for her,” she spoke gently. They went around the corner and Billy paused, waving them to go with one finger to his lips. He crept back to the room where the doctor was setting up the scans one by one, facing them with Mona still twisting a tissue into her hand.

“Ms. Fenny. You understand that these objects aren’t supposed to be in your daughter’s stomach. She needs emergency surgery to remove them and assess the damage. It’s making her sick. Do you know how long she’s had an eating disorder?”

“My daughter doesn’t have an eating disorder.” Mona snapped and Billy pressed himself near the doorway to listen.

“Evangeline swallowed these items. There’s no other way they appeared inside her. I’m sorry.” He explained in a clinical sort of way. “It’s called Pica. Comes in many shapes to individuals. They eat different objects. I’ve seen it only once before in all my years. Had a girl your daughter’s age who ate hair until it made a blockage inside her.”

“Objects?”

“Clay. Hair. Toys. Dirt... Glass.” He went on. “Everyone is different.”

Mona whimpered so he stopped, pulling another tissue out for her to squeeze like she was popping the head of a doll.

“So, what...what do I do?”

“First, we get her through the night. Clean. Repair what damage we can. It’s slight from what we saw on the machine. There’s...something here. Stuck. Maybe a piece of jewelry.” Dr. Simcox traced a part of the intestine. “We picked up these upon scanning and...we’re lucky we caught it. It’s possible to recover in full. Eat and pass things normally if we caught it early enough. I recommend keeping her a few nights once out of surgery.”

Billy snuck another peek at the illuminated scans. Trying to figure this same as Mona.

“We think the fever she came in with was due to this habit. It must have affected her appetite. She must have been in some pain.”

“Evie didn’t...” Mona swallowed to gather herself. “She didn’t come to me. My daughter didn’t tell me she was in pain.”

“We’d like to refer you both to professionals. Someone she can talk to. These habits stem from all sorts of outside stressors in life. With therapy, Evie can get what she needs and communicate herself constructively. It’ll benefit you both.”

Billy hurried out, passing his friends in the waiting room to get some air. It fit. A few pieces at least. Not all of them. Had she done this the entire time they were together? Had she tried to tell him?

He wasn't surprised when Mona Fenny rushed out the same door. Gasping to breathe as if she'd just been drowning. Hands pushed to her chest.

"What the hell is Pica?" Billy blurted, scratching his head. Mona wiped her eyes in response and clicked toward him. "I didn't know. I didn't."

"Do you have a cigarette on you?" Mona braced her hands on her hips so Billy dug into his pockets for a smoke. He offered it and flicked his lighter open until she puffed.

"Don't tell Evie," she inhaled deep and let the smoke filter out, sniffing. One arm pulled close. "I'm sure she already knows. We have our vices. Some are hard to shake."

"Do...Do they know when she'll be out?"

"Could be three hours. Could be ten. Depends on...." Mona touched her stomach and winced. "It was all right there in front of my nose." She puffed again, cherry glowing so Billy lit his own up to join her. "You want to date my daughter, I hope you consider quitting."

"Yes, ma'am. Working on that." Billy flicked the ashes. "I, uh, got my shift covered. Today and tomorrow. Mind if I stay?"

"Evie likes you, Billy. More than she'll admit." Mona pressed her lips. "I like you, too. My girl's used to things being temporary. I hope to God you're not."

"For her, I don't want to be," Billy peered elsewhere, feet shifting. Mona scratched at her brow with one thumb, head shaking.

"God, how many times did she hide herself away and...and do that." She asked to no one in particular. "Evie doesn't know this. I used to have a habit as well. Used to carve names into my ankles. Lotion, pantyhose, and the right shoes covered it. Course my mother never knew. Her name was there, too."

"Maybe Evie should know these things." Billy didn't back down when her eyes flicked to blaze him. Softening. "Just think...talking. You tell her things, she'll tell you things. My dad and I don't talk.

Kinda messed up, but fighting is the closest I'm ever gonna get to him."

Billy wasn't sure why that sentiment made him want to sob. Contained, he turned his eyes away. Puffed deeply.

"He seemed pale when I got here. I appreciate them...staying for my girl. You and your friends too." Mona finished the smoke, savored the end, and pressed it out into brick before tossing it. Billy inhaled, flicking ash again. "Evie's father wouldn't have even done that. Sales had no off hours. Boy, did he find himself some."

She gave this bitter chuckle. Sarcasm that bled her dry.

"He's missing out on a great kid. She'll make it out there. Singer thing. I'm actually happy to sit quietly while she practices. Writes out her lyrics." Billy smiled, rubbing at his neck before he stomped his smoke out. Days where he'd sit with Evie on her bed. Sun rays warming them or an underscore of rain. Kissing her between breaks and teasing tugs at her curls. Trying to talk her away from the guitar for a proper lip-lock. "She's happy, too."

"Jack Fenny'll go in the ground next time he shows his face around here. I promise you that." Mona crossed her arms to hold herself, eyes on the sun peaking between grey clouds. Wind pulled her hair aside and Billy didn't ask why. A stony expression on her tear-stained face. "He is missing out. He missed a lot and so did I. My daughter's in the hospital with an illness they don't even understand fully. I blame him and I blame me."

Billy wanted to burst that half the problem was jumping into bed with her.

"If you're sticking around, we'll need coffee." Mona flipped the same switch Billy had seen in Evie. Smiled. "Go, sit with your friends. I'll go hunt some down."

"Yes, ma'am," Billy passed her to go in.

"And Billy," Mona stopped him, "if Evie's in any trouble. Please tell me."

Something dipped low in his stomach before he turned to force a smile that charmed.

“Sure thing, Miss Mona.”

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Evie woke in clouds. Body stretched across the tufts of heaven’s snowfall. Glittering in lights. The beeping reeled back in to bring a greater fog with it. A moan followed out dry lips. She felt around the sheets when a halo of blond loomed.

“Easy.” The rich voice stilled her. Evie blinked a few times and Fredrick came into view. Seizing, she jerked to scramble around.

“Evie!” Mona flew to her side. Tutting and hushing. “It’s okay, don’t move. You’re okay.”

“Mama...” Evie slurred, blindly reaching for air. Tongue slipping clumsily around her cottonmouth.

“You’ve been in surgery, they said you’d be foggy.” Mona patted curls aside. Fredrick with his intent eyes beyond her. “Billy went to get coffee, let me grab him and the doctor. Freddy, stay here.”

“Ngh...” Evie bucked with her eyes rolling. Fredrick’s hand firm on her shoulder as Mona slipped out the door.

“It all makes sense. This habit. I’d thought you were one of those ‘finger down the throat’ girls.” Bowers actually laughed at her. “It’s alright though, this won’t be an issue when we leave. Can’t have my precious thing hurting our babies. Four at least. Bet they’ll all have some mocha coloring.”

Evie shuddered at him, lips mashing before she reeled forward and puked all down Fredrick’s front. His eyes flashed. A coming slap halted when the door shot open.

“Great aim, Eves.” Billy sipped black coffee coolly. Eyes on Fredrick gaping at himself. Evie licked bile from her lips. Swallowed it down.

“Oh, Freddy. Oh, my god. Let’s get you home. I’m so sorry.” Mona

stepped forward and got swiped at.

“It’s fine.” Fredrick stifled a bark. “Just focus on getting our girl out of this place.”

Billy settled his coffee aside and moved to offer Evie a straw. Cool water washed her mouth out. A soft brace kept her neck from shifting. Itchy as all hell. Fingers tucked hair from her warm brow. Mona helped Fredrick out as Evie’s digits curled into Billy’s coat.

“How long?” She mouthed because sound was still fluttering back.

“Few hours. Sun’s rising.”

“Wanna see what they cut out.” Evie shifted around, pumping her legs to get the feeling back into them.

“That’s biohazard, dear, they trashed it. You don’t want to see all that filth. We’re going to move past it. They have all your check-ups set. Therapist-”

“Stop talking.” Evie moaned and Mona’s pep halted from the doorway. Fredrick long gone. “I wanna talk to my da-”

“Miss Fenny, the doctor’s ready to talk to you.”

“Oh? Right. Evie, I’ll be back. Stay put.” Mona kissed her brow and clicked off in a hurry. Seizing for Billy and air in one swoop, Evie tried to mash his torso into her.

“Evie, easy. Not gonna crush you.” Billy peppered her temple in kisses.

“I smell bad.” She whined when amusement puffed into her hair. Billy braced his arm on the pillow, tilting their heads together.

“Max, she told me Bowers was leaving your house. Talk to me.” Billy worked to find her eyes.

“I don’t wanna talk about him.” Evie begged, arms slipping around him. “Can you just...Can we just talk about nice things? Pretty things.” It was all she could handle. Maybe her mother had a point

sometimes. Evie hummed a tune and burrowed her nose in his chest to inhale the heat of him. The fire she'd love to drown in. "*Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes...* That's my mom's favorite musical. She used to sing me that song as a child."

"Hey, I do have a surprise for you." Billy pulled away and snuck his head out the door, gesturing. Evie's eyes lit up when a goddess floated in.

"Iris!" She squeaked, already crying upon seeing her. Unable to stop.

"Your boy called the lounge," Iris swept to the bed in a billow of fabric from her wrap dress. Hair tied up in a scarf. A bouquet of multicolored chrysanthemums in her arms, bound in old show flyers and twine. "Baby, go ahead and cry all you need. I'm here."

Evie sobbed into her chest as they propped her up. Curled up like a baby. Billy took the flowers to set them aside with a card tucked into them.

"All the queens and staff signed the card." Iris soothed. "I got you, I got you."

Strange to see Evie break for Iris the way one would crack for their mother. Evie pushed her nose into fabric, inhaled jasmine musk and sugary lemon. Fresh like spring showers.

"You don't have to explain it. You're here and you'll get out." Iris patted Evie's head. The door pushed open and they all came up.

"Who is this?" Mona settled her hands on her waist.

"I'm her boss, Miss Thing." Iris stood taller, hip cocked. Strange sort of showdown. Billy wondered about betting money.

"I'm her mother." She processed it. "Boss?"

"Mom, I can explain." Evie had her hand clasped into Iris's own. Mona seemed to notice that.

"Your girl has a lot of love in her corner. Blondie, walk me out."

Iris extended her arm and Billy took it.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Boss?” Mona came to Evie, but the doctor came in to check vitals and take his notes.

“I was gonna tell you.”

“We’ll talk about it later.”

The doctor leaned her back. Ice cold hands pressing gingerly into flesh. Evie shuddered there. Counted the ceiling tiles. Waited for Billy to slip back in. The doctor talked at her. Level and even. Nothing broken but she was battered to hell.

He told her about the surgery. About Pica. About how if she didn’t stop, she wouldn’t be able to process food normally. She’d die. Mona was already weeping again. The doctor told her she was lucky. That it wasn’t her fault.

None of this was her fault.

Evie laughed in his face at that. Unable to stop it. She felt out for Billy. Didn’t want anyone else to get close. And Billy Hargrove was there holding her hand the entire time. Hard and intent like lacing their fingers was his mission in life. Like he’d do anything for her to make her safe again. Like all he wanted to do was go back and redo that night under the fireworks.

Maybe it was the worst time to realize you loved someone. But, something as powerful as just being there for another person so unselfishly brought stars falling.

All poor Evie could do was laugh until every lucky star tumbled down.

Like confetti.

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“Your doctor had good news,” Mona craned her neck to see the

clock. Time seemed to stand still in the hospital. Evie was just thankful for a shower finally. Or sort of sponge bath. She flicked through a magazine Carol left her of prom dresses. Poofing, stiff skirts and glittering bodices. "Evie."

"Yeah, yeah, they need to make sure I shit right and then I'm home free. Yippee." She didn't look at her mother. Too many damn eyes watching.

"Evie, I don't think you should be speaking to your mother like that." Frederick piped up. Evie snapped to see him.

"Freddy, don't mind her, she's had a long day. Spoke to the therapist."

"Dr. Torture. Made me look at ink blots and rambled about nothing." Another page swished. "Said I should get out with friends more. Have a party. Eat my favorite sweets again. Way to solve a fat girl's problems, let her eat cake."

"I'm sure you'll find the sessions helpful eventually, baby, it's new. It takes time. You can talk to me also."

"And me, Evie, we're all here for you." Fredrick eased. Evie wished she had more vomit in her.

Billy would be here later. Evie peered at the bear and roses Steve left this morning. Heather brought her some real food. Tommy came in with Carol, stole the remote from Evie's hand, and made her watch his horrible TV shows. She did laugh a lot however. Carol painted her nails a glittery pink. Billy promised to bring Max this time. She'd asked about Evie endlessly.

"Do you need us to bring you anything?" Mona tried desperately. Grasping at threads. Evie would rather they burnt. She turned her nose up and sneered.

"Maybe a pretty nightgown to wear," she stared at Fredrick and he gave her nothing.

"Clothes. Yes, I can bring you something from home." Mona came to her, kissing her head. "I love you."

“Mmhm,” Evie turned her eyes aside. Resented everyone.

“I’ll gather our stuff and hit the restroom, you go on, honeybunch,” Fredrick touched Mona’s shoulder. She welled at Evie and clicked off. Failing miserably. Fredrick lingered to pick up his coat.

“Honeybunch, how cute. Did you come up with that one all on your own like a big boy?” Evie mocked.

“You’re being unfair, I hope this is the meds talking. Not my Evie. We established things were going to be different.”

“If I snap at her, she won’t be shocked when I run off into the sunset.” Evie peered at him, fatigued and nestled into her pillows. Took a lot of convincing to assure them she wasn’t jumping off that damn roof. Accidents happen. Not like it was believed. Evie was a model patient and she tried to answer everything right. It seemed to pay off so far.

Another problem was looming. Going home. Being doted on by Mona and Fredrick. Trapped in that place. Trapped in a picture frame. In one moment of time that would ruin the rest of her life. Make it hard to breathe. And all those damn eyes.

“I see.” Fredrick loomed and came close to her. Touched his palm to her belly where the stitches were. “And this thing. This bad habit. I assume it’s not going to follow you.” Evie stilled, eyes shaken at him.

“It hurt. The couch.” She whimpered instead. “And I still didn’t say anything to you.”

“Don’t be such a victim,” Fredrick sighed, she was just so unfortunate. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“No.” Evie seized for air. He rubbed her stomach. Every second she healed, she was one step closer to his arms. That couch. “I’m tired. I think I just need a nap. Beauty sleep.”

Fredrick peered at the door and swept down to kiss her. Evie muffled a sound and he came up. She pressed herself into the gurney.

“Be sweet, Evie,” he smiled fondly, “I can’t wait to have you in my

arms again.”

Terror shook her spine, elicited a sob after that door shut. The TV mounted in the corner droned on and Evie curled up. Going home felt like a death sentence. Mona and her hovering. Her confusion. Her inability to see her daughter. Fredrick and his hands. That couch. That photo album.

Evie was supposed to heal. Resume life as normal. Life would never be normal again. She dreamed for a moment that her mother could be happier without her. Maybe she'd take Carol under her wing and be fine. Maybe Fredrick would fall for her for real and be the perfect man. Maybe he'd rot himself missing Evie. Mona would weep and move onto another pair of arms.

Stumbling, she rose from the bed and felt around. Sock clad feet not slipping because of the tiny rubber grips at the bottom. She wore a thin robe over the cheap hospital gown. Rough terry cloth, but at least it was warmer. Evie thought of that chest in the attic. The fact that her mother knew. She knew. All those images that trapped the poor souls inside them.

Evie did not want to go home. Back into the belly of the beast. Held together with stitches and staples. She had all her parts and the world wouldn't be getting them. Not now. Just scratched up and opened and sewn back together. A curving incision was made on her stomach like a crescent moon. Almost elegant.

If she were to get a little more hurt. They'd have to keep her. Just a little longer. Evie twisted the robe's tie and bit down on it. Plucked up a metal tray and applied pressure to the incision. Just enough. She whimpered, teeth twisting. Muffled a whine.

A striking *ping* sounded. Reminded her of a time one of her guitar strings had broken.

Evie exhaled out. Six more identical pings sounded off. One by one. She stumbled. Wiped the tray off and set it back. Hurried back into bed with a wetness seeping. Finger on the help button. They'd stitch her back up. Buying time. That's what she figured. Just buying a little more time.

Tears leaked out the corner of her eyes. Evie clenched. Fumbled and dropped the switch. Heard a crack and clatter. Under the blanket and her robe, warmth was pooling. Faster than intended. She looked up at the light with a breathy gasp. Hitching. The light seemed to expand out. Ready to be her veil. Whimpering, she felt out for the cord her help switch was attached to. Wrist tangled around the IV.

The door opened. Billy was smiling at her in the light. Max ran from the glow by him. Flocked to Evie's bed.

"Easy, Max, don't jump on her." Billy chided, strolling in.

"You're early." Evie's chest sunk. She felt out for Max and missed her hand. The redhead sniffled and leaned over, slowing to move the curly wisps off Evie's temple.

"Evie, I'm so sorry." Max grasped for her. Started asking too many questions. Worrying endlessly. Billy perched himself behind her, one hand on Max's shoulder. He paused, eyes sweeping.

"Eves, you okay? Looking a little spacey."

"I...I think I moved wrong." She fluttered and flushed of her colors. "Heard a pop and...and... I'm sorry. You're so early. You weren't supposed to be here..."

"Evie?" Max braced one hand on the mattress and felt something *squelch*. A machine beeped behind them. Billy perked when his sister brought her hand up. Bright red like tart fruit punch dripped from her little fingers. Billy tore the blanket back and Evie didn't want to look. She knew the red was pouring down the sides of her belly.

He ran shouting at the sight. Max snapped out of it to shake at Evie's shoulders. Crying something that slurred together. Billy returned to skid over, pulling Max away. Hiding her face into his chest so she wouldn't look. Evie tried to thank him for that. Tiny gasps shuddering.

"Hey, hey, stay with me. It's gonna be okay. Evie. Evie." He crushed his teeth. Tears leaking. One hand smothering Max and the other on Evie's face. Tears wet his tee from the redhead in his arms.

“Billy.” She managed, eyes stilling to search him. For once, the absolute truth came out in a quiver. “I’m scared.” The lights were expanding again behind his crown. Halos. If Evie were to imagine a heaven, it might look just like this. The beautiful boy she loved waiting in the light.

“I am, too.” He flashed this grin that blinded her. “I’ll carry it though, so don’t you worry about it. Alright? Evie, stay with me.”

Doctors began scrambling, rushing in to sweep Evie away from the siblings who cried for her. The world blurred together and apart. Sent Evie back into dreams of smoke and mirrors. Balmy summers and glitz. Camera panning to focus as she made her music. As she went under, further down the rabbit hole, Evie couldn’t help but think that this was better.

** ** *

The attempt only bought her two more days and pity.

Evie was a lucky girl.

Aggressive healing. Aggressive therapy where she sobbed half truths. Aggressive Mona insisting on taking her to school and picking her up the first day back. Week in the hospital and all she has to show for it is a ton of makeup work. Tons of pity. Accidents happen. Fredrick hovering in wait to humbly take Evie’s care off Mona’s hands.

“I’ll be right here after school.” Mona was smoking openly, half out the window. She had to deal with her daughter’s secret eating disorder, her daughter’s secret job, her daughter’s new secret routine of care.

“Billy can take me, mom.”

“Evie, non-negotiable. Just until we’re on the right track. We’ll go dress shopping this week. Just you and me. I can make beignets tonight. Your favorite.” She pried to get Evie’s gaze. Which she did eventually. “I’ll stop by the dump and...finish our project.”

They’d screamed at each other. Mona trashing every edible trinket.

Locking away jewelry and sewing items until it's safe again. Tossing out pins and gems and buttons. Evie's collection sat bare. She was lucky to keep Billy's ring around her neck.

"I didn't know about it!" Evie had wailed until she was red in the face.

Flash.

"Sweetheart, just have a good day," Mona sniffled. "I'm trying here. I am. I love you, Evie. You're my whole world."

"Okay." She reached in back for a bundle of tulips. Freshly picked from their yard. Different summer colors. Bright and hopeful.

"Eat all your lunch. I have a nice dinner planned," Mona flicked her cigarette out. Sighed smoke. "No excitement. I'm proud of you. You're doing so good. I have enough for the next therapy appointment. Wednesday."

"Okay, mom," Evie repeated, pushing out into the spring breeze. "Love you." Early, she paced across a near empty lot. Toward the middle school with her flowers cradled close. Billy's jean jacket over a thick lavender sweater. Tight jeans. Makeup done. Nothing amiss except she was dressed too warmly. Covered up too much for the nice weather.

Evie followed the hallway down and poked her head into an open door, knuckles hitting the wood.

"Evangeline," Scott Clarke stood from his desk with a sunny side up smile, "I didn't expect you back?"

"I wanted to come back to school." Evie shuffled in, offering him the bouquet she'd put together. "My mom said you donated the blood when I... These are for you."

"Rare blood types have to stick together. Went to check on your mother and she said... Well, I'm just glad you're up and at 'em. She gave me a card and her famous brownies. Really, it's no trouble." He took the tulips with a sheepish grin. "I'll put these in some H-2-O right away." Scott peered around for a cup and propped them up in

an empty mug. "Glad I could help in any way. Her boyfriend seemed, uh, tense. Hope I didn't cause trouble."

"You like my mother." Evie observed bluntly and he faltered, turning.

"Oh? She always brightens my day when our paths cross. Good deeds are free and I try to do as many as I can." He shifted, bashful, and put his hands on his hips. "You feeling better?"

"I guess." Evie clasped a hand on her bag's strap, shoulders drooping. "Do you think good deeds can erase bad ones?"

"No, but they never hurt." Mr. Clarke scratched his chin. "Learning, growing, and trying. Doesn't erase bad deeds, but it sure can start to mend them." Evie pressed her lips, head bowing briefly. Tone airy and lost because it meant so much.

"I wish things were different, Mr. Clarke."

"That's okay, too," he said, "wishing."

"Thank you again. I can tell people I know a real live superhero now." Evie cocked her chin up, beaming a little because this man was kind without limit. Because he made it so effortless. Because it was supposed to be him dating her mother and not Fredrick Bowers.

"You take care of yourself, Evie." Scott gestured and waved at the door with a bright smile. Not like Fredrick or Tannen or Neil or her father. Not at all. Evie waved as she went, hurrying so she could cross back into the high school. Students passed around her before the first bell. The telltale sound of wheels on cement rolled toward Evie. Mad Max made a beeline down way, skidding to a stop. All alone.

"Billy's already waiting by your locker, just so you know. He almost forgot to lock his car running off." Max moved some stray hairs aside, tumbling out of a messy braid. She plucked a beanie off her head that was more their for the aesthetic than for warmth.

"Are you wearing eyeliner?" Evie tilted Max's chin and got shaken off. Black smudged and grungy around her eyes.

“Took it from my mom, going for a new look.” She shrugged in a tightly tied flannel and worn jeans. “You like it?”

“I guess experimenting is important when you grow up.” Evie noted, careful. “Listen, we didn’t...I’m sorry you had to see that at the hospital.”

“Seen blood before.” Max peered aside. Something vacant in her face. “Are you...? Well, when all that went down...I saw some of the papers in your room. Billy didn’t say anything. I looked it up and...”

“I’m working on it.”

“That man, he’s bad also, isn’t he?” Max met her eyes. “You don’t have to lie. Not a little kid anymore.” Evie frowned at her. Didn’t deny either point despite wishing things were different.

“It’s being handled. I can’t say anything more. Not right now.” Evie searched. “When it ends, I can tell you everything.”

“Does it ever end?” Max laughed at her, near manic, the same way Billy would. She passed Evie to go to class. “I’ll see you around.”

“Max,” Evie stopped her. Red hair shifted. Bright eyes blinking. “You’re not a little kid. But, you can stay young, you know. For a bit longer.”

Max gave this shrug like maybe she tried to believe it before going off. Into school without her friends. Evie did the same. Paced to her locker as the first bell sounded. Students peered at her. Whispered. What ever happened to Baby Evangeline? Our Keg King.

Billy waited there, back turned. All her friends with him. They scattered to unveil her locker decorated in paper flowers. Twisting and curving down the door. Evie couldn’t help rushing at them. Enveloped into a group hug. Billy made a gruff sound at being squished into the circle. Accepted his fate.

“I snagged some of your make-up work and did it. I might have a career in handwriting forgery.” Heather bubbled, passing a folder over. “You can pay me back with a movie date.”

“Thanks, Heath,” Evie’s lips pressed, eyes elsewhere as she went to her locker. “I’m okay, guys. No hovering. My mom’s got it covered. Fredrick has to keep a distance.”

“She’s gonna get busy again and you’re gonna be on the line.” Steve tried. Evie snapped her locker shut and tucked some hair aside. Shoulders dropped while seniors passed back and forth. She looked at her friends. These kids who loved her and who wouldn’t leave this be.

“We’ll just keep doing what we’re doing. Nothing’s different. Couple of bruises and stitches.” Evie seemed to sway there. Billy didn’t ask what pills they had her on. That pit inside her widened like the sky. Full of fluffy clouds in various shapes. “Everything’s fine.” She flashed this painted smile and teetered to pass them in her daze. Onward to class in a sweater that covered up too much.

“We’re losing her, aren’t we?” Carol blew a bubble. “She won’t talk about any of it. Acting like she really sprouted angel wings.”

“What we have here is a dreamer,” Tommy propped his arm up on Billy’s shoulder. They watched Evie flit off. Far up and away. “Someone completely out of touch with reality. Not like the painkillers they buttered her up with are helping.”

“Dr. Torture gave her something apparently. Mellow her out for a while.” Heather sighed. “And he did something. Bowers. Evie would never...” She trailed off when Billy’s eyes snapped her way. Evie’s earring dangling furious in his lobe. Metal glinting.

“I got it.” Billy bristled, shrugging Tommy off to go after his girlfriend. The lucky girl made of lucky parts.

Already lost to the crowds who would one day adore her.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading and sticking with Evie through these heavier times! More to come of course. :)))

****ALSO**, if you enjoy this fic, definitely read [Standing at the Edge](#) by the lovely Lucdarling!!!

It's a wonderful imagining of Billy finding Max drunk and them going to Evie's. Please send her love and leave kind words!!! <3

Please, please chat with me below about the chapter! It's so appreciated and it really keeps me going xoxo

27. A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! Thanks so much for clicking in and please let me know what you think!

Evie's out of the hospital trying to heal and the problems aren't over just yet. Prom looms in the distance and Max sees something that'll change the course. TW: student/teacher abuse, depression, and mental illness.

Evie played. Strumming until her fingers ached. Singing idle lyrics as they came to her. Mona took all the pins out of her walls so she taped her noted lyrics back up in order. Hoping for inspiration. Hoping to plunge in and feel nothing else.

"Evie," Mona knocked, pushing the door open that she'd pried the lock off of with an old screwdriver. Looked like an animal clawed it apart. Evie didn't falter. Plucking strings. Legs crossed on her bed as she faced away. Partially tilted to the window. "Billy's here. Sounds like he'll be around late too. Freddy and I have a late meeting. About the shop. We'll be home later. Need anything?"

Curls shook out. Mona lingered there hoping Evie would look at her and sagged, hands clasping. She sighed and gestured for Billy.

"There's some fruit salad in the fridge," Mona beamed, summoning her usual pep. "You two behave now."

"Thanks, Miss Mona," Billy waited in the doorway when Evie didn't turn, trapped in an endless melody. "That's a new one." The front door locked so he shifted. First time seeing the full aftermath of her bare room. Looked especially dreary without Blue wandering. "Eves."

One palm slapped the strings to quiet them abruptly. Evie turned with haunted eyes. Makeup wiped clean away. Something ashen in the expression.

“Fruit salad sounds good. She only uses the good stuff. No cantaloupe,” she said, rising to set her guitar aside with a sweater dress tipping off one shoulder.

Billy’s stomach rumbled in response.

“Sounds like a yes.” Evie slipped to pass him, hand tugging him by the belt. She lingered only to slip it from the first loop. Empty and flirtatious. Lips twitching but the expression didn’t seem any less grey. She got two forks and the bowl. “I want to watch a movie. Something kinda gory. Can you grab my copy of *Suspiria*?”

Wordless, Billy obliged and came into the living room. Noticed that Evie instead sat on the rug between the couch and coffee table. Nestled herself by dragging a fuzzy blanket down. Billy didn’t comment and joined her after putting the movie in. They fed each other dripping fruits. Strawberries, mangoes, cherries. The good stuff as she put it.

Evie put half the blanket around his shoulders so they shared it. Settled into him. One palm on his thigh to heat the denim. Billy gave a little sigh in response, eyes on the screen when she kissed his neck. Fingers curled to slip the leather of his belt open. Billy’s arm tightened around her shoulders.

“You smell good.” She uttered. Tiny. Nuzzling into him just to be more present. Drinking more and more of Billy down. Evie buzzed. Felt like her fingers and toes were numb. She fumbled for a zipper when Billy snatched her hand.

“Hey.” He turned to find her eyes. Still shaky and aroused. Evie slipped her hand from his. Placed her palm on his chest, under the open button-down to feel him. Pulsing. Hot. “You gotta give me something, Evie.”

“I was just about to,” she purred up at him. Harrowing music and technicolor on screen. It played on her supple cheeks. Billy’s lip twitched before he shook his head.

“You haven’t come back from that hospital,” he began, “I know they got you on something. And whatever happened before it, I-”

“Didn’t really look at the bottle,” she pushed her head under his chin. “Only know that it makes me not feel like myself. It makes me not feel much of anything.”

Kisses like butterflies landed on his chest. He remembered that grinning girl who screamed under the train tracks. Who lit up seeing her birthday present and who flew on swing sets. Who danced through life with a passion in her soul that could burn down cities. Who wrote songs as if she was running out of time. Who owned a stage bathed in blue and red lights. Who looked beautiful under a rain of metallic confetti.

Maybe it was the wrong time to realize he loved Evangeline Fenny.

“Can you feel me?” He asked, eyes watering. Evie’s hand ran back and forth along his chest. She looked up at him with big, sparkling eyes. Hand on his heart that was beating harder by the second.

“No,” she lied and crushed in, “I want to break up.”

Evie pulled from him. Exhaled out. Billy seemed to not process it. Not like he’d ever heard those words in his life.

“We need to break up,” Evie repeated herself because it sounded funny. She stood up with Billy surging. Processing still.

“What are you talking about?” His head shook. “Break up?”

“I mean we stop. All of it. Including prom.” Evie didn’t cry. She didn’t even seem to be looking at him. Billy puffed with aimless confusion, hands gesturing. “You go home and I go to my room and we just don’t do this anymore.”

“Well, I... Don’t I get a say in this, Evie? Fucking break up. What’s going on?”

Her eyes turned to the side to see the sofa. Seeming to spot a ghost there so Billy cupped her face. Made her look at him.

“We’re not breaking up. We’re going to the fucking prom. I’m taking you to Lover’s Lake this summer. I’m gonna see your shows downtown after I get that job at the pool. This thing, it’s you and me.

Fucking you and me, Evie. We're not-

"I think you should go, Billy," she uttered with a great wide nothing expanding. Universes wide, ready to burst. All pulling into a black hole. Billy didn't get angry. Didn't rage. Not immediately.

"What if I don't want to break up?" He scratched the back of his head. "I can stay. We can fight instead. You can pretend to hate me like you used to." Billy twitched like he might laugh. Choked instead. "We can fight."

Evie just stared there. Shoulders slumped. Fingers twisting.

She didn't scrunch her face. Didn't try to run or shove or lash. Didn't put up her defenses.

"You gonna tell me what I did?" Billy shuffled his feet, arms dropping at his sides. "I'm still the asshole that brought you to that dance with all those girls."

Evie ripped into him sweetly.

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am!" He barked. She didn't even flinch. Just huge eyes caught in headlights. "Say something, Evie." Hands took her by the shoulders. "Tell me I'm that asshole. Tell me what I did. Just fucking talk. About your mother. Bowers. Pica. Did...? Evie, when did that start? Was it after the dance?"

She welled that time.

"I think it was something I always did."

"But, you picked it up after the dance. Didn't you?" Billy shook her. Hoping for something. Hoping for Evangeline to punch her way back out of this.

"I think you should go."

"If I leave you alone, are you just gonna...do it again?"

“I can stop. I won’t do it anymore.”

“My mother said the same thing.” Billy quivered to his core and Evie sparked. She cried out, a broken sound that shattered against every wall. Fought him. Twisting madly. Elbowing at his chest because he crushed her in.

“I don’t want to be with you!” She puffed at him. Coming alive. “Just go! Get out!” They skidded over into the wall. Evie, still pushing aimless, trapped in the steel of Billy’s frame. Lingering soreness alight within her bones. He shifted, half dragging her down the hallway. “I’m gonna run away with him. Fredrick. I’ll do it, I will!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Billy got them into the bedroom. Let her fall into bed. “Just lie down.”

“We’re breaking up.” Evie’s puffy red eyes flickered as she shoved at him. Frizzy curls falling into that desperate expression. He sat there. Let her bat at him pathetically on her side. “I don’t feel anything, Billy.” Fingers curled into his jacket. She squeaked a sob.

“I’ll feel for both of us until I get you back.”

“I just don’t want to do any of it anymore. I need a break. I can’t... My skin hurts.” Evie heaved aimlessly, sagging. “We have to break up.” Billy faced away, feet planted. Hands rubbed at his face.

“God damn it, Evie,” he glanced at her eyes panning to see him. Voice cracking. “God *fucking* damn you.” She sniffled so he got up, shoulders squaring before he walked out. Not fighting. Not raging. The front door slammed. Shadows crawled and Billy’s Camaro charged up. Took off.

He didn’t return to her window.

** **

Neither Billy or Evie knew who’d be ousted by the group at school. So, Evie made it easy. Small talk between classes. Separated at lunch. Even leaving when Steve tried to join her. She still dolled up and smiled. Still ate almost everything in her packed lunch. Practically

perfect. Living in daydreams of glass slippers and pumpkins that became royal carriages.

Carol and Heather didn't ask once about Billy when Evie went with them to pick prom dresses. Although another ball dropped.

"You're not going to prom at all?" Heather turned from her pretty reflection in the mirror. Same time Carol poked her helmet of red curls out of the dressing room. "Evie, you have to go. It's prom. You can go with our group."

"I'm just not up for it." Evie sat curled up in a little armchair, magazine in hand. "I'm beat. I don't have time to get a dress. All the money is going toward my...appointments and bills."

"Well, I can-"

"Heather, don't offer what you're about to. I'm okay. I just...don't see the point. Billy and I aren't talking." Evie trailed off, chest sinking. She flicked a page.

"Normally the guy would chase another skirt and all he does is mope, flick his lighter, and skip class. This is obviously about Fredrick."

"Not everything is about Fredrick." Evie lowered her voice. "Excuse me for not feeling up to a dance. I just broke up with my boyfriend and I have a million stitches holding my insides together. I just want to get to summer in one piece."

"We just don't want you to miss out," Heather eased, "but if you really don't want to go..."

"It's not for me." Evie's lips pressed. Pink gloss shimmered. "The theme is *Happily Ever After*. Fairy tale and camp. I just...I'll sit this one out. Heath, you need to buy that dress though."

Heather shifted with a sigh at the mirror, pulling fabric up. Strapless metallic pink number with a mermaid silhouette. Frilly tulle at the bottom.

"Carol, let's see yours," Evie called back to the dressing room. The

door pushed open so Carol could pose. Short dress with a poofing skirt in glittery teal. Frilly bow over one shoulder. "I love it."

"We can take pictures and come hang out." Heather put her hands on her hips. "Steve and I are going as just friends. We can do movies."

"No, stay late and have fun," Evie peered around the corner and sighed. "My mother's waiting."

"At least talk to Billy," Carol fixed her hair over one shoulder. "The lighter flicking is annoying."

"Yeah, sure. See you guys." Evie, distracted, plucked up her school bag and hurried out. The bell rang at the front, signaling she'd gone.

"We have to do everything, don't we?" Carol said to Heather's reflection, turning from side to side to admire the swishing skirts. "My reputation tanks and I'm showing up to this damn thing. Shove it in Tina's face. Her and her minions."

"You're still on the Prom Queen ballot." Heather quipped, winking. "Let's call the guys after this. Getting Billy to the dance will be easy if he's simmered back to puppy mode."

"Not like Fen will be easily dragged away from her guitar. All defense. Her secrets have secrets. She dumped them all and has been floating high ever since. Secret ex. Secret disorder. Secret boss." Carol moved so Heather could unzip her. Flounced back into the dressing room. Heather stared thoughtfully at herself. Fingers snapped.

"She did seem to love her boss."

** **

And so, Evie played. Seated on her porch. Away from Fredrick and Mona prepping a dinner inside. Perfectly portioned plates to go along with her evening meds. She played until the world melted down. Candles that flickered and went out in perfect sync because a ghost filled the spaces of every room she entered.

Billy stepped his cigarette out across the way. Paced up the porch

and sat down with her on the swing. Waited until Evie finished her song and looked out at the grass. Tulips sprouted high and bright around their home. Billy fiddled with his hands, one foot idly pushing the swing.

“Does that one have lyrics?”

“They’re coming along. Slowly.” She paused. “Heard you disappointed the crowds. Not showing up to that last party.”

“They all run together. Look the damn same. Red solo cups and the same songs. I’m bored of it. Won’t challenge the reigning King either.” He gave this tired smirk. “Just working. Trying to reel Max’s dumb ass back in. She snuck away to that party and Carol called me. Found her with a fucking joint in her hand. High as a kite.”

“Shit, I hadn’t heard that part yet.”

“You would if you hadn’t shut out your friends,” Billy turned to see her. “It’s fine. Sometimes you gotta shut down. Stupid, but fine.”

“How’s Max?”

“I dropped her off at the arcade and kicked her ass inside. Made her play some games with me until some of her old friends showed up. She was a little happier after that. I can’t blame her for following after the people she lives with.” Billy puffed, eyes elsewhere. “You don’t have to hang out with me. If you wanted to come over and watch some movies with Max, I know she wouldn’t be mad about that.”

Evie turned her head to see him.

“Could use some movies. Something scary, of course,” she replied, cradling her guitar so close like a shield. “You’re not mad.”

“I’m always mad.” Billy held his belly to laugh that time, leaning back. “What, you think I’m mad at you? I could make a scene. Pull that chain off your neck.”

He winked. Evie felt his ring burn against her chest. One hand reached but Billy snatched it.

“Wear it a bit longer,” he decided, the swing creaked as he stood. “See you around, Angel.”

“Billy,” Evie paused there to feel the wind on her cheeks, “you’re good at it. The whole boyfriend thing. If you wondered.” His boots paused on the steps to shift, head tilting to see her. A beat before he was wandering off, shrugging easily.

“Wasn’t a bad gig with you.”

** ** *

No teenager should be spending prom night in their pajamas. But, here Evangeline was for the night. Still attached to her guitar because it was the only thing that made sense. Freshly showered in a soft pj set covered in lambs. Fluffy robe tied tight around her waist.

“You’re really not going with friends?” Mona lingered in the doorway, finding every reason to peek in. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t have a date, sweetie.”

“Just not into it.” Fingers plucked idly. Evie stared up toward the corner of her bedroom. Finding her lyrics. “Gotta write my one great song.”

“You’ll have plenty of hits.” Mona paused. “I could drop you off.”

“I don’t have a dress.”

“Well, we could figure something. I just don’t want you to regret tonight, Evie.” Her mother crossed to sit on the edge of the bed. The strumming ceased. Palm flat to still the vibrations.

“Do you regret having me?” Evie turned to look her mother in the eyes. Saw her hitch a gasp that shuddered her bones. Almost felt like she struck her.

“No, never, why...” Mona touched her chest as if she’d been shot. As if she’d been slowly bleeding out for eighteen years. “Why would you ever think that, Evie?”

Evie thought to compile her mother a list.

“You always call me your whole world,” Evie quivered and finally came apart totally, “as if I keep you back from doing stuff. And letting you down is life or death. And I’m not enough. I wasn’t enough for dad and I’m not enough for you and now you’re stuck with me and...and I broke up with Billy because I’m not enough.”

Manic hands shoved the guitar aside so she could curl up there. Evie wouldn’t let herself cry so she rubbed her nose on the edge of her sleeve. Curls clean and ruffled out in shiny waterfalls. Mona came to the bed and touched her shoulder.

“Evie, I-”

Two knuckles rapped on the ajar door. It creaked open so both women stilled.

“Sorry, ladies,” Fredrick leaned in with his hand on the doorknob and a sunny smile, “I let myself in. Mona?”

Mona turned from him to Evie, trembling with a hand to her lips. Composing, she stood. Stepped toward Fredrick. Then, back to her daughter.

“Your dream’s waiting.” Evie pressed her lips and picked the guitar back up.

“Evie,” Mona frowned at her, “Freddy, I’ll meet you outside. One moment.”

He kissed her cheek and slipped out.

“Evie...” She said again. “I know we don’t talk about your dad.”

“We don’t talk about much of anything, Mom.” Evie hunched over her instrument. Fingers tracing the strings. “You don’t even know that I can’t stand performing folk music. That I-”

“We can fix this all. We can talk about it. You can always come to me.”

“And then you do that, mom, you just steamroll when you don’t like what you hear. Does it really confuse you that I don’t come to

you when I'm feeling crummy or when a boy makes me cry or when I'm not sure how to wear my damn hair even-?"

"I'm listening, I am!" Mona swept to her side, manicured talons curling into Evie's sleeve.

"You don't! You just plow over me to control it all. You have to be perfect and I have to be perfect and everything has to be perfect. I can't take it! And you just become someone else for every loser you bring into this house because I'm not enough for you!" Evie sucked in some air. Lips pressed sadly. "I know Nana hurt you real bad, but you just...smother everything or ignore it if it isn't pretty. I'd never be your first choice for a daughter, mom, look at me! I have to fight twice as hard to just be allowed to exist. To be taken seriously."

A car horn honked and Mona jumped up. Evie felt herself sink when they locked eyes again.

"Just go. Your perfect salon and perfect boyfriend are waiting." Evie turned back, face scrunching. "All my life, I wanted to be you. Thin and pretty and always knowing what to say. Perfect extrovert, life of the party. My mom marched for human rights. My mom always stood for something big. And I can't even recognize her anymore. I don't recognize me either."

"You're my baby, the only one I wanted and-"

Another honk. Mona sniffed hard and shuffled.

"Evie, I promise you, we'll talk. I'll send Freddy home right after and we'll sit down. We'll get this out. Please, I just need you to know I love you so much." Mona knelt to kiss Evie's crown. "I don't know what I'd be without you."

"Maybe you need to figure that out, mom," Evie tried to say it kindly, head turning so she could press her lips up, "I love you, too."

"I promise," Mona backed up to the door, "I'll rush home. Please. We'll talk this out all night."

"Okay," Evie turned back.

Mona lingered there. Thought to lock the doors and just stay. Thought to say something else before she was clicking off in a hurry. Evie stared at the wall and then she began to play again. Like her life depended on it. One great song, that was all she needed.

Evie played. And played. Changed the melody as many times as she wanted. Got lost in the sway of notes. Strummed long and endless until the room spun. Until her door opened again.

Gravity had her charging up, tune cutting with a harsh sound.

“Fredrick!” She clutched her guitar closer. “What are you doing back here?”

“It’s our night.” Fredrick tore her closet open. Started to rip clothing items and bags down. “Your silly mother forgot her wallet. I’m so kind, I said I’d fetch it. She needs her ID to sign some last minute papers after the meeting. We have an hour before she notices, we know how she loves to talk. Should buy us extra time and-...well?”

“Tonight?”

“It’s the only way. I can’t wait. We’ll find a chapel-”

“I’ll pack...you get the car ready,” Evie smiled and flinched when he came to her.

“Years! I’ve waited for you.” Fredrick plucked the guitar from her fingers. Evie burst, hovering so he wouldn’t drop it.

“And we’re leaving, all right? You and me,” Evie eased, eyes on her beloved instrument. Her prized possession. “Let me get my things. We’re already breaking rules. Bad luck to see your bride on the wedding night.” She felt around his chest, pulling her guitar from him to settle it safely aside. Breathing easily, Evie’s gaze darted.

“I’ll grab my things from Mona’s room. Meet me outside in ten minutes. Hurry.” Fredrick swept down, pulled her in for a hard kiss. Moaned.

Neither saw Max Mayfield in Billy’s bedroom window. Her freckled

face twisting in shock. Bright eyes huge like saucers.

They looked like a black and white photograph Max saw once of a sailor kissing a nurse. Smashing Evie in with arms hooked too tight around her body. Everyone fawned over how romantic it looked. But, Max remembered getting the creeps from it. The sailor's muscles bulging as if he forced the nurse into his mouth. Like he was sucking the soul from her. The nurse looking as if she could barely breathe there in the crowds.

Fredrick pulled out with stars in his eyes before he moved to go.

"Fredrick," Evie spoke and saw his wild stare upon turning, "I meant it when I said you put me back together. That summer. I know what I deserve now."

And now Evie Fenny learned all she could from him.

"I know and I can't wait to start our forever," he shut the door. Shaken hands settled a bag on the bed, she paced and pretended to fill it. Peering out to see Billy's room empty. Tears dripping down her cheeks. Evie reached for her blinds and a hand waved in her face. Bejeweled with decorated nails and rings.

Her cry muffled. Evie scrambled to push it open with a finger to her lips.

"Iris?" She gasped out while the sun finished its descent to bed. "What are you doing here?"

"I was sent on a fashionable mission." Those sparkling nails flicked a yellow flyer at Evie's nose. The prom poster. "You have some wonderful friends, you know? Said you weren't feeling up to the dance and you didn't have a dress." Iris bowed her head to pose, pretending she had a magic wand. "You can call me your Fairy Drag Mother. Ex-Drag since I'm retired. Although, I don't mind the idea of being God, whoever she is."

Fake lashes pulled to wink.

"Heather and Carol?" Evie took the flyer, head turned to listen for Fredrick clicking around in Mona's bathroom. Probably rooting for

loose money she kept hidden in tins. "I can't."

"You need to remove that phrase from your vocabulary. The girl who owns my stage would never use it." Iris's talons curled over the window until she found Evie's hand to hold it. "Give yourself one night where nothing else matters. One dream that'll lead to more. For you shall go to the ball, Cinder-Evie...that's my line, right?"

Evie felt herself well, pushing the flyer to her chest. Wishing on stars.

"I'm afraid."

"Everyone who's brave is afraid, my dear, we all start somewhere. I have an RV full of borrowed drag and my boyfriend in the driver's seat sitting in the middle of a small Indiana town. Too many people are flashing Reagan signs round these parts. You have a trans woman standing in her favorite Diane Von Furstenburg dress outside your window. I'm terrified. But, I love you and so do your friends and we shouldn't let them wait."

"Iris, I love you so much...and I did something bad. Really bad."

"You're a lot of things, Evangeline. But, you're not bad. So, let's get you some wings and we'll fly right out of here, honey."

Evie looked at the door again and dropped the flyer on her bed. Her fingers wove into Iris's. One perfect night of dreams awaited complete with her magical pumpkin and glass slippers. And a prince at the end.

"Get me out of here."

And they didn't see that observant redhead in the window behind them. Max was at the point of priding herself on staying in shadows. Not as if Neil or her own mother noticed her. Changing. Falling apart. Did it matter?

Max watched Evie get whisked away with the rev of an old RV. Billy had sped off two hours ago after a phone call from Harrington and then a louder phone from Carol. Max was happy. Happy this girl she looked up to had a chance. She wanted to pretend it gave her

some hope as well. Her stepbrother and the neighbor girl living their fairy tale for one night.

Eyes turned to see that man who looked like a prince barging back into Evie's bedroom. His eyes darted. Became inflamed. Hands tore up the flyer from Evie's bed and Max felt her own skin crawl. The prince took his horrible red carriage and sped off too.

Max wasn't sure why she felt so compelled, but she snuck out her window with her skateboard after. Hoping to warn Billy and Evie of this monster in chiseled skin. A giant that would come to break their happily ever after apart.

Mad Max also hoped she wasn't too late to save them. She might be strong enough to save herself too.

Notes for the Chapter:

Eeek! Sorry to leave it there! Prom is next and I'm SO excited to share that. We're coming upon the end of this big arc :))) Thanks again and pretty please interact below! I'd love to chat.

28. Anyone Who Knows What Love Is (Will Understand)

Notes for the Chapter:

Guys!!! It's all led up to the final end of this arc, oh my god. It's been a trip and thank you so so much for sticking with me, I realize the last few chps have been so hard but I really hope this makes up for it! Also, Hi Luc!

Evie has a prom night she'll never forget as everyone clashes together.

TW: Abuse, death, talk of s*icide.

A chaotic ride was nothing to the steady, quick hand of a former drag star who used to do their makeup crushed between other performers. Stuffed in a dressing room breathing sequins and strangled in tulle. Iris worked her magic with the wave of many brushes. Curves and swerves.

Evie was dusted in shimmer along her collar bones and cheeks. Perfumed and primped. Curls teased and pinned on one side with a gold feather clip from Iris's own hairdo.

Painted to the gods.

"Well, how do I look?" Glitter sparkled when black lashes batted, neck craned to see the mirror. An angel stared back made of heaven's light. An absolute star.

"You just might be my greatest creation," Iris clapped her hands, "you're already late. If you need a ride after, call me. But, something tells me you'll be just fine, hon."

"Iris," Evie's face twitched at her, eyes glazing over, "I can't repay you."

"Thankfully, kindness and love are always free," Iris tipped her

chin to smile. "If I had an ounce of the fire and bravery you have when I was your age, I think so much in my life would have been better. I waited too long to be brave and I'm not letting anyone else do the same." Evie took Iris's hand, lacing their fingers before she shook her head.

"No, no," she sniffled, "you're my hero. You own every room you enter and seeing you glow like that... That touches all of us. You love and you live for you. And you spare so much time to be kind to others. If I had you growing up, I'd be better now."

Iris smiled there. So radiant. So happy she was alive. She cupped Evie's jaw and pushed their heads together.

"I always wanted my own little one. Tried adopting several times but...you know how that goes," Iris came out, "always wanted a little girl who'd be my shining star. Since I met you, I haven't been unfulfilled over that in a long time. We deserve so much good and we can't be afraid of good when it comes into our lives. So, go inside and be with your friends. And enjoy the night. All this good coming, don't be afraid to share it once in a while."

"I won't be afraid," Evie put her head up and smiled as she turned. "Drive safe. Bye, Marlon."

"Knock 'em dead, honey," came a call from the front. Iris saw Evie off. Teeth flashing.

"That's my girl."

Evie went out into the breeze. Heels clicking. Not quite glass slippers but close. Toward the rowdy dance in wait. Skirts fell in flowing layers. Iridescent in dreamy blues and lavenders. Blue bodice that shaped her to a plump hourglass. Gentle waves of more tulle hung off her shoulders. A true Cinderella. A shooting star for wishes. A dream. Unfurling as her curls bounced. Wild same as the ocean calling from every corner of the world.

She clicked into the open doors and felt eyes turn. Music reverberating, the high school was decorated in moving lights and streamers. Set pieces from the school musical perched about. Castle

and woodland flats all freshly painted and shiny. Evie let herself bathe in the slow turn of lights. Music bellowed from the stage. She didn't hide from the eyes, shoulders higher. Evie owned it all.

Eyes scanning, she saw him. Billy being shoved up from his chair. Comically swatting their friends off him. Punching Tommy in the arm for slapping his ass. Evie touched her lips to giggle. Heather and Carol bouncing. Giving her a sly thumbs up. She and Billy locked eyes and sound cut. Lights pulled to focus and nothing else existed. Maybe there was truth to cliches. Just an endless black sky filling the spaces around them.

Evie moved first. Took charge until they were crossing to each other. Billy in half a suit. As much formal attire as they could get on him. Slacks, an open white shirt, and blue suspenders. She saw his eyes shift to the chain around her neck.

“Hey,” he began. Sparkling.

“Hey,” Evie mirrored. Inches apart. Able to smell his cologne and see herself in those ocean eyes that she'd written a song about. Still rippling heat. Glowing freckles and curls worthy of Eros himself. A smile curled his mouth.

“We both got kidnapped, huh?” He cocked his head without looking behind him. “Are they watching us still?”

“Big time, we might have a future in very specific TV,” Evie brought her hands up to clasp them. Billy shifted his stance. “Kidnapped? I heard you drive off.”

“Carol reamed my ass over the phone and I sorta just woke up here after in the borrowed suit pieces.”

“Ah,” Evie broke to laugh and his own lips tugged because he missed the sound, “she certainly has a unique power.”

“And, you, Cinderella,” Billy's gaze lowered. Fingers gave her dress a playful tug. “Where'd you get this?”

“Iris rallied her queens and let me borrow a few things,” she touched the skirts, swaying idly there. “Nice being a diva for a

night.”

“You’ll need the practice for later,” Billy studied her. Fully alert. A beat of searching eyes before Evie shrugged.

“Want to try the dance thing now?” Curls bobbed as she spoke. Eyes crinkling when the smile grew wider. Music electrified the room. Bryan Adams’ song about heaven blasting. Tumbling over them with a sheen of glimmering stage lights.

Baby you're all that I want

When you're lyin' here in my arms

I'm findin' it hard to believe

We're in heaven...

Billy sighed out, eyes darting. Took her hand and pulled Evie into the thick of bodies. Hidden away at the center. Awkward hands searched about until they pressed together. Feet shifting to the flow of teens twirling about. Evie peered up as Billy looked around, holding her with warm hands. Her arms on his shoulders. She watched the lights play on his face. Lashes fluttering too pretty as always.

Evie sank into him. Settled her head on his shoulder and just held him. They didn’t talk through the intense beat of music filling the spaces around them. Billy’s heart pounding with it. More songs followed. Slow and upbeat. They never spoke. Just danced in a whirlwind there. Friends joined them. Teens bouncing around along the floor in a flutter of technicolor.

A hand pulled Evie out of the hormonal sea toward the punch table. Billy’s chest gave a pleasant glisten as he poured drinks.

"Cheers." Plastic cups clicked.

“Not spiked, I’m shocked,” Evie moved to the prom ballots and scanned the names. “Billy...did you know we were on here?”

“Oh, yeah. I think Tina and Steve both got nominations. Carol got

one too, but that was her ex-friends being assholes,” he gulped and stole another cup full. Snacking shamelessly. “What’s that scrunching look for?”

“I have an idea and I need the help of a fellow royal,” Evie’s smile glowed there before she came to whisper in his ear.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Giggled elicited. They laced fingers and wove through crowds. News spread like wildfire. Billy gave her a playful spin and dip like a little boy again. Music rocked the room apart.

“So, you wanna go out? Be my boyfriend again? Do boyfriend related stuff.”

“Did I really stop, Eves?” He laughed at her. Arm around her waist to tug. Evie melted into him as their lips met. Shameless and not worried about teachers pulling them apart. As if they could. She forgot everything else. Forgot Fredrick rattling around her house. Probably furious she’d gone. Instead, she pulled Billy in, made him spin about with her. Young and in love.

“Having fun?” Heather stole Evie away in a fit of laughter.

“I am!” She danced with her and Steve. Got a peak at Tommy and Carol making out behind them. Lost in their own world. Evie beamed again. Teens were pulled to the stage when the announcements came later. Mindless chatter about the end of the year before the important part came. Anticipation sparked. Evie found Billy’s hand again without looking.

The king was no contest. Billy Hargrove.

Queen garnered gasps before the applause. Carol Perkins.

Carol’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. She peered at Evie and Heather who she clearly figured would have beaten her. Even Tina after the shitty semester. Carol with her broken home fearful of the future. One night where love bloomed all around her. Evie gave her a nudge so she followed Billy to the stage for their campy crowns.

"Proud of those kids, huh?" Tommy slung an arm around Evie's shoulder.

"Very much so. They're all grown up now," she agreed. "Wanna dance, Hagan?"

"As long as you don't fall in love with me."

The queen and king led the first dance before other couples joined.

"Billy's got his eyes glued on my hands," Tommy chuckled after a beat and Evie peered to see him. A snort followed. "We're running away together, Hargrove!" Evie spied Carol's full smile while she swayed. Stunning and bright. Butterflies fluttered up her stomach. They eventually traded back. Finished the song before the girls veered off.

"Lipstick break?" Carol led them off into the hallway. Cooler air whistled along. Dark lockers for miles it felt as they clicked together. "So, how did you pull the queen thing off, Evie?"

"Acting like I bribed people," a shrug hitched, "Billy and I led a blazing campaign is all. Crown looks better with your red hair. People love you, Care, just let them."

"Well, I am not taking this off for at least a week so get used to it."

Heather giggled as they got to the bathroom. Evie fussed around in a stall with her skirts.

"I guess I should also thank you both, for the scheme to get Billy and I here," she came out to the sinks. Heather was struggling with her tights as Carol swiped some fresh red gloss on. One hand poised over the mirror.

"So, what's the word with you both?"

"We haven't talked about it much. Just sorta knew we were back," Evie washed her hands and checked her face. One finger swiped under her lashes. "Feels right though. No complaints. Just dancing with a pretty boy who thinks I'm pretty too. Right now, I don't want much else."

"I'm sure he'll be sweeping you away after this," Carol winked.

"Shit!" Heather groaned. "I snagged."

"I carry clear polish for that, let me in there," Carol deadpanned, knocking brashly on the metal door. Heather gave a whine.

"Stupid nylon, my nail pricked it." There were a few clicks and Carol was let inside.

"Cute undies."

"Thanks, they're new."

"I'll meet you guys in the hallway, I'm burning up," Evie pushed out into darkness. Cooler air wafting as she swayed there. Watched the skirts flit same as clouds crossing the sky.

She still heard the ghost of music down the way. Saw lights glint and reach out from the opening. Hair on the back of her neck rose. Skin prickling. The chill flowed down her body the same way wax melts down a candle. Dripping endlessly.

There was a breath on her curls. Ragged and heavy. Evie gasped, spinning toward a pair of furious eyes.

"Fredrick," her cry cut when his iron hand shackled her wrist.

"You ran away from me, Evie," Fredrick was gone. Wild at her. Near tears. Near exploding. "Don't you fucking make a sound. How could you? You made me do this."

Metal caught the distant light. A knife he ripped from their block at home.

"You broke my heart, you know that? And you're gonna spend forever making up for that," he tugged her from the music. From the lights. From the boy waiting for her. Knife near jabbing at her collar. Poised too close to her neck. "Come on, hurry."

"Fredrick, stop, just stop," Evie skidded. "You can't do this! I don't want to go with you!"

“Evie?” A curious call down the hallway had Fredrick rushing her. Evie almost tripped into the blade. Twisting.

“You don’t know what you want,” Fredrick wasn’t looking at her. “I’m going to take you somewhere and remind you. Everything I did, it was all for you and I’m not letting you shit on that!”

“You did it for you!” Evie grit her teeth. “I don’t want to go with you! I don’t love you!”

“Liar!” He pivoted to scream in her face. A beat unsettled them. “You’re coming with me. You and I, forever. If you don’t want to be with me, I’ll kill myself. I’ll kill you first. You hear me! I’d rather you die than be with anyone else. I’d rather die than be without you. It could be romantic, we’ll do it for love.”

“You’re a fucking monster,” Evie squirmed when he pulled her ruthlessly through the doors. “I’m not going with you, I’d rather die! Just like your wife! She’s free of you and you can’t stand that!”

“Shut up!” Fredrick shook her out like a rag doll. Cold air licked at them, lashed without remorse. “We’re going somewhere and I’m going to show you how much I love you. And you’ll get on your fucking knees and you’ll do everything I say. You’ll make this up to me.”

Evie snarled at him.

“My mother said I couldn’t put small objects in my mouth anymore.”

Fredrick let her go only to slap her. Red scathing across her cheek. Fire built. Evie fought him across the cement. They went around the building over a grey walkway toward concrete steps. Fredrick’s shiny red devil of a car at the bottom. Purring with the headlights beaming forth in wait. Ready to rev into the next sunrise.

Evie knew if he put her in that steel trap, she’d never escape. She’d never be free again. She’d be in her tomb.

“Let me go!” She pushed the knife hand away to beat on his wrist. Heels clicked up behind her.

“Evie!” Heather was pink in the face, hand tight into Carol’s as they raced after. “Stop, let her go!”

“We’ll scream!” Carol stepped forward and Fredrick tore Evie by the curls into his front. Knife up. Shaking.

“The adults are busy, little girls, go back to your dance,” Fredrick hissed out, Evie thrashing in his grip. “Evie needs me. Don’t you?”

“Lemme go,” she whined at her tender scalp, clawing to get out of his arms.

“You’re the same sad girl who walked into my classroom crying about her daddy,” Fredrick made a sound that was between laughter and tears. “You’re just a silly little girl, Evie, with no one around to protect you.”

At that point, Carol was tossing her dangling earrings to the ground. Both girls inching closer.

“I...” Evie choked there, growing harder. A fury. Venomous. Utterly alive. “I *don’t* need you.”

A cry elicited when she chomped down on his arm. Inches from where Max had bitten him prior. Fredrick shook her off. Slapped her to dislodge the bite that drew blood. Evie was flung forward. Barely caught by her friends.

“He grabbed Max. Everything. It was him, he stalked me and he’s gonna take me away. He said he’d hurt my mom if I didn’t go!” Evie sobbed. Clawing into their arms. The knife hit the concrete in the scuffle. Heather lunged forward to kick it aside and Fredrick howled at them. Shattering before he went for Evie again.

“Get away!” Carol pushed Evie aside and got knocked over. Heather jumped on his back. Arms flailing as she tore her pretty dress right up the side. Seams splitting. Silky fabric and tulle flew up. Shredding apart like they all might be transforming under the moonlight. Fredrick slapped at them. An ocean’s weight of woman’s force and fury against him. Something he could never hope to beat.

Evie skidded to get up and tripped. Fredrick had her hair again

after he threw Heather to the side. Carol dragging from his right leg. Both girls revving up to beat on him as he kicked and punched at Evie there. All of them screaming. Howling. Evie felt her lungs start to sputter. Fought with all her might before he could tear into her. Heather ripping at his hair while Carol smacked at his other side.

Another cry raged over all of them.

And then the weight was shoved away. Over Evie's head so she saw the moon there. Caressing her battered face in its peaceful glow. In sweet silence. She pushed up and heard a sickening crack. Maybe it was Fredrick's skull or his neck. Or both.

Legs wobbled and she looked over the stairs. Saw him splayed at the bottom in the washed out echo of his headlights. Horrible spotlights that illuminated red welling out from under his head. Eyes open wide at nothing. Not looking at her any longer. Not able to look at any girl ever again.

"Fredrick..." Evie wheezed, blinking. Unable to move because there was weight on her skirts. Sound pulled back in and she saw more red. Waves of orange locks lighting with a swell of wind.

Max. Face down in Evie's lap sobbing. Thin fingers grasping desperately. None of them heard her running down the way. Pushing Fredrick as hard as she could just to get him off Evie. Max could have seen anyone there being beaten. Her mother. Billy. Herself. And when she ran toward the monster, she was pushing Neil.

"Max," Evie took in air, lifting Max up by the shoulders as her shocked friends closed in. They held each other while they all cried. For themselves. For their mothers. For the boys they left at the dance waiting. For each other. For anyone lost in a cycle of hurt that went every direction uncaring of the souls it burnt.

"Evie," Max came into her arms to cry like a baby until she was squeezed and hushed.

"I got you, we're okay. You're okay," Evie took her little face. Freckles splotched in a hard blush. Carol and Heather pushed in on either side. Frantic voices overlapping. "Hey, it's okay. I did it, Max. I

pushed him.”

“Evie, no, we’ll say I did it!” Heather sniffled, head shaking.

“Hey! Stop it, all of you. Just stop,” Carol wiped her eyes. “None of us pushed him. He just tripped. He fell. It was an accident, we didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Max, hey,” Evie pushed their foreheads together. Covered Max’s salty, wet face in kisses. “You saved me. You did. Okay? I love you. You saved me.”

“I’m sorry,” Max cracked. “I followed him here on my skateboard. I watched him around the building and...I thought he was gonna kill you.”

“But, you saved me. You’re gonna be okay, but you need to go right home and get into bed,” Evie wiped Max’s splotchy cheeks. “You were never here. Stay in bed. Don’t leave until the morning and eat breakfast with your mother. Give her a big hug and kiss, alright? You did so good. I’ll tell you everything later. I promise, Max, I promise. We’re okay.”

She pulled the younger girl to her feet.

“You saved me, Max,” Evie welled again, cupping Max’s jaw. “And you have to go home now.” The younger girl jerked forth to hug her. Girls came together again. Squeezing too tight. Wheels rolled off into the distance as Max sped away with some coaxing. Crying the entire ride.

“They’re gonna know,” Evie limped to the steps to see Fredrick there at the bottom still. Seeming to look right at her for one split second. She mourned him still. This man who tried to tear her apart. Who hurt every girl he touched. Mourned that he still did so much damage. “They’re gonna know everything.” And her life and future would be a scandal. Her mother would fall apart.

“No, they’re not,” Carol winched as she tossed bobby pins out of her hair. Easing the ache on her skull. “Because we’re going to tell them he was here for me. That I slept with him. Carol Perkins, Prom

Queen. Hawkins Harlot. Disaster from a broken home.”

“I’m not letting you do that, Care.”

“Well, I’m doing it anyway. Maybe Miss Mona will forgive me. Nice having a mom that doesn’t buy drugs instead of food. My reputation can handle it, Fen.” This smile crossed Carol’s face that near broke Evie’s heart. “I was never gonna go places.”

“No! It’s not fair. You can do anything you want and this-”

“And I’m doing this. I was so shitty to you and I’m gonna set one thing right. I did shitty things to people who... Just one thing,” Carol took her hand. “Besides, the worst they can do is take my plastic crown back. It’s already broken there. What? They gonna call me Hawkins Trash, I’m queen of the pile and they’ll lick it up.”

“I love you, Carol,” Evie wiped her nose, streaking makeup on her hot cheeks.

Another brighter smile.

“Duh. I know that.”

“We...” Heather still seemed to be in wide-eyed shock. “We need to get help.”

Instead, they held each other one final time. Knowing full well even still that Fredrick Bowers had no chance against the force they created together.

** **

Sirens lit up the Hawkins night sky. Yellow tape rolled about. Crying and curious students beyond it. Mourning a teacher without knowing the horrid truths that would follow. Evie was crushed into Billy’s arms. Not hearing anything. Sobbing into his white shirt.

She saw Heather and Carol pressed close together. Foreheads touching. Whispering and reassuring before they split to Tommy and Steve. Light from an open ambulance framed Evie and Billy there. A blanket pulled around her shoulders. Police and EMTs wandered the

scene. Got the story the girls decided on. The narrative was gift-wrapped in pink ribbons.

“Evie! Evangeline! Where is my daughter!” Mona Fenny shoved an officer aside in her pursuit. Pushed him clean into the grass.

“Mom...” Evie rasped, coming out of Billy’s arms. “Mama!” She picked up her skirts and hurried forth. Almost got knocked over by her mother colliding.

“The police, they drove me here. They said...” Mona planted kisses anywhere she could. “Oh, my baby. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re here now,” Evie winced, eyes searching. “Fredrick...” Mona’s face fell. Eyes searching before she shook her head.

“I know and you’re the most important person in my life. I’m so sorry, he could have...I didn’t know. I didn’t. I just wanted someone to love me and I neglected that I had that all along. They said he...” Mona pulled her back in. “Can you ever forgive me, Evie?”

Evie just hugged her. Cried. A voice pulled them apart.

“Miss Mona...” Carol shuffled there. Played up her shame. “I wanted to say that, I’m-”

A hand pulled the redhead into the embrace.

“You’re both amazing girls,” Mona said, squishing them together. “And I was so blind. Only way out of this is through.” Carol shuddered. Accepted a mother’s love. Her pinky wove into Evie’s idly. “I need to speak to Chief Hopper. Right now. That damned monster was in my house. He’ll go to the grave with this town knowing what he was.”

At that moment, Hopper was coming up the stairs. Hands on his hips. Face pinched in deep thought. He crossed with long strides as the teens gathered.

“Mona,” he addressed her, eyes on the kids a few feet away being tended to. Eyes on Evie specifically. “I have to take the girls in. Just for a statement. And then we can get them home. Miss Holloway’s

parents are on some trip and Carol's aunt was in the city for some work."

"I can take them home after," Mona touched her chest. Saw Fredrick at the bottom. Jim took her shoulder to steady her. "Oh, my god."

Near the ambulance, Steve was fixing the blanket over Evie's shoulders. Arms already coloring over with tender bruises.

"Still with us, Evie?"

"Yeah...yeah," she swallowed a lump down, seated on the edge. Billy perched next to her smoking. She stole a quick puff to relax, hand wrapped around his wrist. Hopper was looking at her still across the way as he spoke to Mona. Seeming to put pieces together. The three girls were herded off. Separated. The story was easy enough so they all gave the same version of it. Bad timing. Bad accident. Bad relationship.

"You alright to talk to me, Evie?" Jim set a cup of water down on his desk. Evie was shuddering in her dress and blanket. Makeup running. Spots of blood on her gown from her nose and lip that was wiped clean. Nasty red swatched on her temple and cheeks. She frowned thinking of explaining the mess to Iris.

"Yes, sir."

"Need another ice pack?"

"No, sir. Thank you," Evie sniffled, eyes elsewhere.

"So, you didn't know about Carol and Mr. Bowers?"

"No, sir. She was...hurting. After what happened with her parents. Mr. Bowers was the hip teacher. I always thought he was weird with the girls. Friendly-like. Touchy-feely."

"Did that include you?" Jim tapped away on his typewriter. Clicking that pulled Evie to focus.

"Guys like Mr. Bowers don't go for big girls who look like me," Evie

blinked, “sir. Open any fairy tale, I don't get to play princess.” Jim’s seat creaked as he shifted. Eyes intent. Kind.

“You look pretty,” he spoke instead. Caught her eyes once. “I notice, Evie, that you got the worst of it. Heather and Carol are a little beaten up, but neither of them look how you do now.”

“Oh,” Evie wiped her nose, “stupid me. I dove between Carol and Mr. Bowers. Got a few hits in. I guess I figured, being bigger than Carol, I could handle it. He would have broken her bones. He didn’t break me.”

Jim searched her. Saw her eyes flick to him and away a few times. Shaken up. Truth around every lie.

“I guess it’s a miracle he didn’t,” Jim decided. “How was Mr. Bowers around your mother?”

“We didn’t interact a lot. They’re all mushy,” Evie shrugged. “My mom likes to date, he’s a creep. Probably needed a cover and Carol was around our house a lot. It’s not her fault. She didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No, I don’t think any of you did anything wrong. More monsters in Hawkins than we all like to admit,” Jim tapped his fingers on his desk, sitting back. “Your mother shouldn’t blame herself. Sounds like this guy was a good actor. Sounds like he had a pattern. Never too old to put yourself out there either. At our age.”

“Aren’t you dating that weird, pretty lady on Cabrini Avenue right now? The mortician?” Evie changed the subject. “Is she really a witch, Chief Hopper? That’s what people say. Casting love spells, I could have used one once or twice.”

“Ah, stories have been exaggerated about my girl,” Jim shook his head to ghost a smile. “Evie, still, if there’s anything else you want to say. Anything you remember. Anything you need to talk about. I’m here.”

Evie found herself thinking of Max. Probably curled up in her bed weeping silently to herself. Waiting for morning light to pull.

Needing someone.

"Does your girlfriend get along with your kid?"

"They do now, took some time. El's not easy to trust. But, that can be built with time and care."

"That's nice," Evie sipped the water, eyes elsewhere. "That some families have a chance even if they're made of broken pieces."

"Everyone has a chance," Jim clasped his hands on the table, "people learn and they grow with what life throws at them."

Evangeline only smiled with a shrug.

"Sometimes they don't."

** ** *

Mona took them home. Took some convincing to get the teens to part. Evie kissed Billy on the porch, popped her foot up for good measure to play out her fairy tale ending. Still felt beautiful and brave and alive.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Evie hushed against his mouth. Fingers pawing. Wanting more.

"Sing me that song you like so much, huh." They swayed together. His hands slipping around her back. Smoothing. Facial stubble tickled before his mouth opened against her own. "That funny one you're always humming."

"Oh..." Evie's melodic voice was a sigh into his kiss. Head cocking up so she could see the shine of those bright eyes. Dreaming as one. Bared utterly. *"But anyone who knows what love is...will understand..."*

Billy gave her another taste. Under the moonlight, they came together with his broad palms cupping her jaw. Prying for just one more goodnight kiss.

"Gonna sing to me all summer, Eves?" Knuckles drew up her chin.

"Only if you say please, Billy," she burrowed into his arms. Almost got lost there on the porch. "Maybe when I look a little less purple."

"No, you look good still, Angel," Billy met her eyes to purr. Tugging at the ring around her neck with something glittering he only dared to share in darkness. Said something that tangled her heart. Something she'd remember for the rest of her life. "You look good wearing my future, Evangeline."

Overcome, Evie tossed herself into him. Had Billy by the shirt to devour him and he would have let her.

"I like that," she decided. Exhaling against Billy. Forehead tipping to his chest. "I gotta go. I gotta go inside. I'll come over tomorrow when I can. See you and Max. Can you...Can you check on her? Make sure she's having a nice dream if she's sleeping."

"Yeah," Billy tucked a loose dark curl aside. Pecked Evie's cheek. "Go, see your mom."

Mona needed her inside so Evie let him go. Billy waited until he saw the Fenny lights go out to put his head against the pillow.

Evie joined her mother at her vanity. They wiped traces of makeup aside together. These masks that women put on to face the day down. Wordless, mother and daughter tore the sheets off Mona's bed. Tossed them out and remade it with some old ones from the closet. Mona stared at the mattress. Burst into hot tears.

"How do men like that find us, baby?" She shattered. "They go out looking for women who are...are so stupid."

"You're not stupid, they're just small and they want you to think it's our fault."

"All my life, Evangeline, I swore I'd never be like my mother. I ran and ran from her as far as I could. I told myself I'd never lose my baby the way she did. I was younger than you are now. I turned on the oven and laid my head in it," Mona clenched. Confessing. Facing Evie across the bed as they stood on equal footing. "I figured I'd just go to sleep and dream forever. Truthfully I haven't slept since."

"Mom..."

"My mother screamed. Slapped me so hard when she found me. I thought that was love. Maybe it was for her. I hear her screaming every night and it only gets louder when I think I might find you like that. I might lose my baby, too."

Mona Fenny tore this sob Evie would never forget. Covered her face to hide away. Evie was still in the princess gown. Climbing over the bed to hug her mother.

"You didn't lose your baby," Evie felt Mona's talons digging into her skin. Mother and daughter crying together. Years of anguish they hid aside becoming catharsis. Something next to it. Falling onto the covers to hold tight. Knowing what was most important in this world.

"I'm not a good mama."

"You're still my mama," Evie cooed, head under Mona's chin so she could finally be held. Cradled like a baby there. "You always will be." Moonlight streamed into the window. Became a gentle veil so they could rest together.

"I know my pep is too much," Mona sniffled, kissing Evie's crown endlessly. "But, I can feel summer on the air. And I promise you, Evie. I promise you it'll be a good one for us. I'm so proud of you and I love you. I'll never stop."

Evie closed her eyes. Safe in her mother's arms for possibly the first time.

Believing truly that the next day would be a better one for them all.

Notes for the Chapter:

Please please please, I hope you guys enjoyed that end and I still have some great summer stuff I'm moving to next. We're finally free of Fredrick! Love all my Big Little Lies refs culminating ;D Me also sobbing that this song title means v different things for Evie's relationships with each person in the fic,

good & bad.

I'm writing a lot of great stuff for different fandoms atm on the side & main but I still love everything about this fic and I hope you guys do too. More to come. **Also!! If you want more insight on Jim's pretty mortician gf on Cabrini Ave ;) My story 'looking for the magic' is also being posted for those who enjoyed the nod to it! xx

Pretty please, chat or shout with me below about this chp or the fic itself or anything!!! I'd love to talk and comments keep me going always. XOXO Thank you all so much and see you for my summer arc ^_^

29. An Awfully Big Adventure

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone. I know I may disappoint some with this. This is the last chapter of 'sins of my youth.' I hope you understand the choice I'm making. I love Evie and Billy with all my heart despite anon problems, dying reception, and negativity with the fandom.

I've written this fic for a year and it's been great! I've grown so much. I have not been beaten but I'm at a place where I'm ready to end this story on my terms for this couple I love so much and move on to other things. This couple I know many others have also loved. LFTM will get a similar end soon once I'm in a place to write it.

As many of you knew, I did have an entire last arc planned and built but I know I'm just not in a place to be writing it. That's not to say I never will. A possible sequel story might come about if season 4 lights me up again. I even had plans for more Billy fic after this that is currently on hold. I'd love to explore more summer, Hargrove house, Evie's backstory, her friends, and her future in music! Billy as well ofc!! One shots are also very possible. Still love my smut lol. Inspiration is so funny and wonderful. But, I know this is the absolute right thing. Apologies for the length.

Evie and Billy deserve their ending and so do I and so do my lovely readers. Please stick around to chat if you can and I'd love to hear for you wonderful people. xx

Epilogue. Summer.

Sprinklers cast. Spraying a glittery sheen of water under bejeweled

god rays. Rainbows shone through. Emerald grass gleaming all up and down Cherry Lane. Brought the entire street to life with neighbors about. Hawkins seemed to have a heart beating under it.

Evangeline Fenny sat upon her porch flicking through a magazine. Clad in high-rise denim shorts with a pink bathing suit top. Her curls big and full. Vaguely damp from the nearby sprinklers raining diamonds over her. Billy's jean jacket loosened over her shoulders.

Wheels rumbled over the sidewalk. Max Mayfield rode up. Flashed a tired smile that was genuine. Her new normal. Red hair wild and free under a backward baseball cap.

"Stole us some candy from mom's tin. She's had this craving for strawberry suckers," Max offered a stick before unwrapping her own. The younger teen plopped down. "So...Lucas and I are going to the arcade later."

"I think that'll be a nice time."

"Billy scrounged up a few quarters for me," Max scrunched, "I hate when Lucas tries to pay for everything even if he's so nice about it."

"Boys," Evie's eyes flicked to one waiting for her. Billy in her *Everlast* shirt that he cut into a summer crop. Red shorts from lifeguarding at the pool earlier. Bent over the hood of his car fumbling with something. A smile glittered her entire expression when he caught her watching him. Wiggled a suggestive eyebrow. Thrilled to be the object of her affection.

"I'm off, girls," Mona clicked down the porch between them. Weeks passed. They healed. Tried to. Sometimes that was all you could do. Keep on living. And, frankly, Evie considered it to be the greatest adventure above all. Peter Pan had nothing on her.

Mona kissed her daughter's head.

"We still doing the movie tomorrow? Something scary?" She endured it because she knew Evie loved them.

"Yes, popcorn with extra butter," Evie paused, "love you."

"I love you too, baby. Max, you should come with us. Girl's night. Carol and Heather are also going," Mona extended the invite. Max peered at Evie for a nod and received one before she beamed.

"I'd like that, I'll ask my mom real quick and let Evie know," Max jumped up. Left mother and daughter for a moment as Evie finished up her sucker. Turned her tongue and lips a candied red.

"Mr. Clarke asked about you again, mama," Evie hesitated. "Ran into him in town with Billy when we stopped by for ice cream after he got off. That new mall is pretty great. I..." She fished into Billy's jacket. "I grabbed his number. For you. Maybe you can tell him yourself. I've retired from passing love notes. Officially."

Mona blushed about three shades away from Barbie pink.

"Well...I suppose that couldn't hurt. Are you...Are you sure, sweetie?"

"I'm sure. I might have told him what time you start work today so he might beat you to the punch," Evie received another kiss. "Have a good day at work. You were right about the new location."

"Moving up in the world. Don't look at that flyer all day, we have a lot to talk about," Mona lifted one finger before she was flitting off. Out into the full sun like a gossamer veil of pure gold. They had each other and that was still enough.

At that same time, Max was pushing into her house. Saw Neil at the window like a watchdog. Stubbly and almost greying. No bottle at the moment.

"Didn't realize the Fenny girl was a bit of a tramp," he stared at Evie's outfit. Max ignored him because the vigilance meant he was on edge for an impending job interview. She followed the path to the kitchen where the sink was running. Susan dabbed her lips on a napkin. Slightly sweaty in her hairline.

"Sick again, mom?"

"Just smelled something funny, I'm fine. It's nothing," Susan stared at the window. Paled. Nervous hands scrubbing dishes until they

scratched. Max lingered and came forward. Dried one to be nice and helpful.

“Can...I go to the movies with Evie and Mona tomorrow? Her mom invited me,” Max set one dish aside and reached for the next one her mother offered.

“Sure. No cursing and be back at a good hour,” Susan heard the garage door slap open and shut. Neil liked to disappear down there and work on his own truck. “Looks like Evie’s playing that guitar again.” They watched the girl strum on her porch through the window. Lost in the flow of music swelling. Truly happy in the light of day. “I play a few instruments...did you know that? Was good at them too.”

“Kinda,” Max blinked.

“Cello was my favorite. Day and night. I played and played. I went to a nice school for it even. Your dad...he really encouraged it. He was the type. Encouraging dreams even if they slipped like clouds through your fingers. Even if they change because life changes and standards are... The world sometimes speaks louder than one sweet voice.”

The sink sounded more like white noise as Susan sighed.

“Evie’s gonna be a star,” Max said. All the belief in the world in her thumping heart. Sometimes she dreamed of nothing but a push and a long fall. A crack. Dreamed she was saving everyone over and over again. But, there were people she would never be able to save. That weighed on her. Sand filling the bottom of a great hourglass. Susan seemed to be dreaming too. One wet hand that was raw from scrubbing touched her stomach.

“I was very, very happy when I was studying music. Even if I didn’t know where it’d take me. I kept my cello in storage for a long time and...Neil sold it before the move. He sold a lot of me off,” Susan confessed before she shut the sink off. “But, I get to watch girls like you and Evie shine. I always wondered what that might be like.”

Max just watched her mother press this sober smile.

“When you both get there, you’ll let me know, will you?” They moved at the same time. Tossed their arms around each other.

“We will, mom, I’ll make sure Evie knows too,” Max chuckled so she didn’t choke. “I promise...” Outside, Evie strummed with some ferocity.

“*And, whoa, oh, oh...*” She sang, “*you can have your Skirt Safari...*”

“That one’s angry. I like it,” Billy took a seat on the step just under her. Relished that she leaned in close to steal a quick kiss. Tasted strawberry.

“Iris told me to write something with a little added fervor. It’s my new single and it’s gonna win me the ride of my life,” she winked, palm flat to still the music. “I’m going to Vegas to win.” One hand slapped the flyer open in his lap. “The band that won last year is already touring. Call themselves *Low Shoulder*. Bunch of punky, pretty boys. Winner gets to open for them and gets a shot at their own contract. And it’s going to be me. Evangeline.”

“Tannen’s gonna piss when he hears that on the radio. Might sue you for royalties. Lose because you’ll have a bunch of suits ready to kiss your skirts.”

“You’re getting me so hot when you talk like that,” Evie pushed her guitar aside and kissed him hard into the post attached to the steps. A dust of growing stubble scratched as she obscenely opened her mouth against his. Gave the nosy neighbors a show. “Talk about how rich and popular I’m going to be again.”

“Okay, Carol,” he laughed at her as she drew back, stealing the flyer to smack his knee. “Watch the goods, Angel.” Billy reclined on his elbows. Legs stretched out before he sighed. Coming alive with a flood of citrus summer air. His long lashes closed as he basked there. Made of pure heaven while she was made of shimmery stardust. Evie ran her fingers into his curls. Her pretty Eros glowing. “When you win, I’ll get to flash magazines at everyone in this hellhole. That total babe is *Evangeline*... She’s my girl.”

Billy smiled as he watched the sprinklers dance. Looking too

beautiful, it was utterly criminal. Evie just stared at him. Traced the scar barely peeking up from the shorts on her chubby stomach. Fingered Billy's ring hanging around her neck. He still wasn't looking so she felt safe enough to say it.

"Hey, so I love you," Evie burst the words all in one go. Billy's lashes fluttered again like butterflies in his stomach. Or luna moths.

"I knew that, Eves."

"I have for a while, too."

"Fuck," Billy said, turning to her. "I don't remember that Mr. Darcy line you made me say." He looked at her hand braced against the porch before stealing it. Pushed a lazy kiss into her wrist. "Love you back." He whispered into Evie's pulse. Vibrated the syllables up her veins the same way her guitar strings dance. "I was gonna say it first."

"Liar," Evie leaned down as he tilted his head back for a kiss. Thought he saw wings unfurl from her spine. Mighty and feathered with a pearlesque sheen. Cloaking them both.

"You got me," Billy murmured into her mouth, pushing up to taste more of her. Starved and never able to get enough. Evie's hand cupped his jaw. Lingered.

"I do," she picked up the flyer. Held it before them both with a broad smile. His fingers laced into her free hand.

Evangeline Fenny looked at Billy Hargrove and he looked at her. Two people who now had each other. Totally and completely. Unashamed of a love that ran deep and endless.

And they were beautiful.

"...And this is our next big adventure."

~~~

*I've got these habits that I cannot break  
And as I'm older there is more at stake*

*Go ahead and call me fake but these are the sins  
The **sins** of my youth*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you to everyone who kept me going. Luc, Cat, Miri, and Tara. You guys are so great!! Everyone else who started with this fic or started with WTL. People who have always been there or not, you guys kept me writing when I felt hopeless.

I hope this story was able to touch people in a positive way. I hope Evie's amazing character did some good and helped others feel connected. She's the absolute light of my life and she has a place in this fandom no matter what anyone else thinks. You all are so beautiful and I'm sincerely so so thankful for the people who clicked in and reached out to support me. Share anything you wish below please, personal stories and all, I would love to hear from readers and I love you all so much.

Thank you xoxo

### **Works inspired by this one:**

- [Standing at the Edge](#) by [lucdarling](#)
- [morning seems so far away](#) by [lucdarling](#)